

On 17 March 1883 Frederick Engels delivered a short speech at the Funeral of Karl Marx. In summarising his contribution to society he focused in particular on Marx's contribution to the study of human history, what is often called the Marxist theory of history or historical materialism.

Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of this contribution to Marx's work is hard to overstate. It forms the starting point for any Marxist analysis, it is from this basic principle that he articulated the unique nature of human beings and elaborated the emergence of the first human 'hunter gatherer' societies. It is also the framework on which he based his explanation for the emergence of class societies and their subsequent development, indeed it is from this study of societal change that much of the wealth of the Marxist tradition springs - from the unique position of the working class within the capitalist system to the theory of alienation.

The comparison with Darwinian evolution made by



## History

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Engels is an apt one in many respects. In both cases a set of elegantly simple assumptions, when carefully applied, can lead to a highly satisfying – and indeed profound – understanding of the subject under study. In the right hands historical materialism has produced a rich body of work and made important contributions to our understanding of human history. Conversely, just as Darwinian evolution has often been debased by its would-be adherents and/or critics so historical materialism has also suffered from both misuse and misrepresentation, both from those who claim to be Marxists and from those who would criticise it – often on political or ideological grounds. Just as reducing Darwinian evolution to a crude genetic determinism can strip it of its wonderfully subtle explanatory power – often in service of justifying existing societal conditions - historical materialism has often been reduced to a crude caricature, both by those who would oppose its revolutionary implications and by those who would use it for their own ends as indeed Stalin did while he consolidated his power in the 1930s.

As Marx never wrote a definitive account of his theory of history, and much of what he did write on it was either never intended for publication or utilised in works dealing with the analysis of particular events, it is not surprising that historical materialism has produced much debate. Arguments abound over what exactly Marx may have meant and over the exact details of various historical events and changes.

Given the vast literature that exists on historical materialism it is difficult in a short article to deal with its totality in anything beyond a cursory manner and next to impossible to do more than mention in passing the many controversies and debates surrounding it. In this article I will limit myself to a brief introduction to the subject, setting out the basic premises laid out by Marx and outlining their importance in understanding how human society has developed and changed throughout history.

### **The Basics: forces, means, modes, base and superstructure**

The most commonly quoted starting point outlining Marx's view is taken from the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. This relatively short passage contains all the essential elements to Marx's theory and outlines their role in societal change:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.<sup>2</sup>

There is much to consider in this quote and it is worth unpacking it; in particular there are five terms which merit close attention. These are the concepts of the forces of production, the relations of production, the mode of production, the foundation (more generally termed the 'base') and the superstructure.

Broadly the *forces of production* constitute the materials available to a given society from which they can produce what they need to maintain their existence. This includes the raw materials, the general level of technology and knowledge and of course the labour (people and also animals) available in the society.

The *relations of production* refer to the ways in which the people in a society come together to organise production. This includes relations such as those between

a medieval serf and lord under feudalism or the wage labour arrangement between the working class and the capitalists under capitalism. The relations of production are also key in deciding how any surplus - anything produced that is not immediately required to sustain the society - is extracted from labour and distributed.

Taken together the forces and relations of production determine the *mode of production* - a definite economic system.. In very general terms the mode of production describes both the general level of technology available (forces) and, crucially, the manner in which wealth is generated in the society and how it is distributed (relations). The concept of a mode of production is quite broad and as such can be tricky to fully understand.

By way of an example if we consider European feudalism over the course of several hundred years it is clear that the forces of production, the technology available, certainly developed in significant ways during that time but yet the basic application of this technology changed relatively little in terms of the methods of agriculture that provided for the basic needs of the society and generated much of its wealth. Similarly the relations of production also varied over this time, at different times and places relations such as serfdom were more or less important – or indeed even absent – yet the basic social relation of feudal lord extracting a surplus from the peasants remained whether this was through an institution such as serfdom or simply through the levying of taxes on production. It is this combination of the technology, its application and the method of surplus extraction that broadly determine the mode of production. It is also worth noting that other different social relations and even forms of surplus extraction can coexist within a mode of production, while these may be significant in the society they are not reflective of the majority relations of production within the society in terms of wealth production. We shall return to this topic later.

The final two terms we need to consider, the *base* and *superstructure*, are vital to a Marxist analysis and yet their definitions and, perhaps most importantly, the relationship between the two have lead to much confusion.

The *base* of the society constitutes the 'economic structure of society', that is the relations of production operating in the society and how they act on the available forces of production. In essence this is in many ways equivalent to the concept of the mode of produc-

tion and constitutes the definite basic economic relationships present in the society.

The *superstructure* refers to the specific ideological and political structures which arise in a given society to explain, regulate and ultimately justify the underlying economic relations. These can include the laws and legal structure, the state structure, religion and religious dogmas, customs, rituals, art and philosophies.

The distinction and relationship between the base and superstructure is key to understanding the process of change in a society and Marx continues the passage from his *Preface* quoted earlier by noting that

In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish 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, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production.<sup>3</sup>

Firstly it is clear that the economic base is seen as the ultimately determining factor in societal change, not the manner in which the direction or speed of the change is fought out in the realms of politics or philosophy. These ideological debates are based on a real material struggle where the relations of production in the society have come into conflict with developing forces of production.

What is not so clear however is the nature of this determinism. It is not simply a crude determinism or one sided relation where the base absolutely determines the superstructure and the manner in which the societal change will lay out. This view would rob historical materialism of much of its power and leave no room for the actions of those actually fighting out the struggle – a view which can lead to a passive or fatalistic view of history. Marx himself was acutely aware of this and emphasised the role of human agency, albeit a constrained agency, when he wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it

as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.<sup>4</sup>

Engels also sought to distance both himself and Marx from the crude determinism found in some interpretations of historical materialism writing in a letter sent in 1890 that:

According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Other than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas – also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events whose inner interconnection is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent, as negligible), the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary.<sup>5</sup>

### Modes of production

In the *Preface* Marx outlines a number of modes of production stating that:

In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society.<sup>6</sup>

To this list we may add the so called ‘primitive communism’ of the early pre-class hunter gatherer societies. Marx also makes reference to two additional modes in a section of the *Grundrisse* dealing with pre-capitalist economic formations,<sup>7</sup> namely the Germanic and Slavonic

modes (although the Slavonic mode is only mentioned in passing and no real information or definition is given for it save to imply it is related to the Asiatic mode and as such I will not discuss it further).

Debates over the exact nature of each mode, the applicability of modes to given historical societies and transitions from one to another have filled many volumes, here I will give only the briefest outlines of these modes and make a short comment on transitions between modes.

The *Asiatic* mode refers to some of the earliest class societies to emerge, in general it is characterised by small communities or villages who work the land collectively and without, for the most part, private property relations – in particular relating to land ownership. These communities may exist as a part of a larger entity and give some of their surplus to a ruling body, this could occur for many reasons from paying to wage war or the provision of large scale irrigation. This mode is the least developed form of class society and closest to the communal holding of land and property found among hunter gatherers.

The *ancient* mode was based around cities surrounded by farmland. Societies belonging to this mode tended to be dynamic and expansionist and as they developed slavery tended to lay a major role in economic life. Ancient Greece and Rome are the classic examples of such societies.

The *Germanic* mode is based around individual families or similar units who produce for themselves but belong to some larger structure, often tribal, and come together at periodic intervals for reasons such as war, religious rituals or settling disputes.

The *feudal* mode is characterised by local lords and peasant farmers who are in some way linked to the land and obliged to provide a portion of their surplus to the local lord. This mode encompasses many different societies ranging from the small regional kingdoms of the early feudal period to the much more elaborate societies (in terms of their structure and hierarchies) of the later feudal period.

The *bourgeois* mode is of course the capitalist mode of production under which we live today, characterised by a capitalist class who control the means of production and extract wealth from the labour of the working class.

In one crude interpretation of Marx's listing of the modes of production, one particularly associated with Stalinism, phrases such as 'marking progress in the economic development of society' have been taken to por-

tray this list as a set of successive steps which societies must go through in the course of their development. This is far from what is intended in Marx's writings.

These modes are quite broad and societies may not always neatly fit into one or the other, this is of course particularly true in the case of societies in transition. It may take a long time for a society to show all the characteristics generally attached to a particular mode. In addition it is possible for another mode of production to develop within an existing society – just as capitalism initially developed within the feudal system.

The modes are not to be seen as strictly successive, Marx appears to have viewed the Asiatic, ancient and Germanic modes each as a path of development out of pre-class society. He also outlined the manner in which these modes could develop into a feudal mode.

The offering up of a part of the surplus in the Asiatic mode could well prefigure a system of feudal dues if the communal hold on the land is broken. Should the ancient mode, through for example over expansion, begin to decay from its own internal contradictions there may be a move away from slavery and towards something much more like the feudal mode of production. Similarly if the isolated individual units of the Germanic mode were to begin to coalesce around a town it too may begin to develop towards the feudal mode.

Of course in the real course of human history almost no society develops in complete isolation and neighbouring societies will influence each other. This is all the more true when dealing with societies where very different modes of production prevail. The effects of one society on another might range from a simple importation of new customs, goods or technology right up to the wholesale replacement of the existing relations or even mode of production due to war and conquest.

At this point it is worth reemphasising again the subtle nature of the concept of the mode of production. Societies that are in many, very real, respects quite dissimilar may well share a common mode of production. Indeed it appears that right up to the end of their lives Marx and Engels never stopped interrogating their own concept. After reading a book on native American tribes, which he had borrowed from Marx, Engels wrote to him in December of 1882, a few months before his death, commenting on the parallels – despite significant differences – between the native American tribes and

the Germanic tribes described by the Roman historian Tacitus. He observed that:

The similarity is indeed all the more surprising because the method of production is so fundamentally different—here hunters and fishers without cattle-raising or agriculture, there nomadic cattle-raising passing into agriculture. It just proves how at this stage the type of production is less decisive than the degree in which the old blood bonds and the old mutual community of the sexes within the tribe have been dissolved.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

Historical materialism is not simply a theory of history but a set of powerful concepts, rooted in the basic material conditions of human existence, which allow us to analyse the key elements of any given society at any given time.

Starting from the simple, indeed almost obvious, observation that humans are social species who must come together in some form of cooperative structure to produce their basic requirements for life and utilising the framework proposed by Marx in the way in which he intended—that is in a dialectical manner where all the various forces at work in the society are seen to act and react upon each other in an ongoing and dynamic manner—we are able to identify the key processes and conflicts at work in the society. We can gauge their relevant material importance at any given time and peer through the ‘overgrowth of ideology’ which often masks the true underlying causes to analyse them in such a way as to not just simply understand them as they are but to gain an insight into the possible future development of the society.

The power of the method of historical materialism doesn’t just end with these analytic and predictive tools though. The emphasis that Marx placed on the actions of human beings themselves is central to any Marxist analysis and this opens the very real possibility of the subjective element of human activity intervening in the struggles within to society to encourage and direct change even if the broad outlines of what is actually possible at any given time are constrained by the objective conditions then present in the society.

It is this possibility of actively changing society, of challenging the oppressor and improving the lot of the oppressed, that is fundamental to the outlook of Marx

and to those who seek to continue his revolutionary struggle today. As he put it himself:

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

1 Frederick Engels’ Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx, Highgate Cemetery, London, March 17, 1883. [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm](http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm)

2 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977 [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm#e1](http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm#e1)

3 *ibid.*

4 Karl Marx *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm](http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm)

As a brief aside it is worth considering the implications inherent in this observation in relation to how a person’s world view is formed. If human beings have their consciousness shaped by the material conditions of their lives then even the way in which they view themselves will change as their material conditions change. In short people in previous societies simply did not think about either themselves or their societies in the same way as we now do in a capitalist society. Consider the revolutionary principles which were espoused during the great Bourgeois revolutions—ideas such as the rights of man or Liberté, égalité, fraternité—and to us today they are second nature, even if we often experience them as mere platitudes in the face of deeply unequal societies. It is impossible for us today to fully conceive how revolutionary such ideas were to a society struggling to overthrow the old feudal order, we simply cannot think in the same way as someone who lived their life under feudalism as we have lived all our lives under a capitalist system where the ideas of the great Bourgeois revolutionaries have been firmly engrained. It is not that a feudal peasant wouldn’t have wanted an easier life or found aspects of life to be unfair they just would not have expressed it in the same terms as we would today, the concepts of individual freedoms and rights we have today—even our concept of individuality—simply didn’t exist in the form we would recognise prior to the emergence of capitalism.

5 F. Engels to J Bloch, 21 September 1890 in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Selected Correspondence 1846-1895*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1936. Also available online at [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90\\_09\\_21.htm](http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm)

6 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977 [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm#e1](http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm#e1)

7 E.J. Hobsbawm (Ed) *Karl Marx Pre-capitalist economic formations*, International publishers, New York, 1965.

8 F. Engels to K. Marx 8 December 1882 in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Selected Correspondence 1846-1895*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1936. Also available online at [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1882/letters/82\\_12\\_08.htm](http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1882/letters/82_12_08.htm)

9 Karl Marx, *Theses On Feuerbach* [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm](http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm)