

William H. Shaw

Marx's Theory of History

productive forces

historical materialism

technological determinism

recapitalist society

transition from capitalism

historical evolution

relations of production

WILLIAM H. SHAW

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To My Parents

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W.H.S.

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Introduction

THIS ESSAY is a contribution to the study of Karl Marx's theory of history.¹ Although the literature on Marx is rich, hardly any work deals with this particular subject in the systematic and sustained fashion which it requires. Understandably, most of the secondary sources, concerned with introducing the man and rehearsing his main ideas, do not approach the kind of analysis of Marx's theoretical commitments which is necessary if his conception of history is to be satisfactorily evaluated. Such works rarely offer more than a short chapter on historical materialism, and usually limit themselves to paraphrasing the "Author's Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. On the other hand, more detailed and erudite investigations, centering on contemporary debates, have focused their attentions elsewhere; studies have ranged over Marx's economics, dialectics, theory of alienation, and intellectual evolution, but insufficient effort has been directed toward historical materialism.

The prevailing consensus among scholars suggests that the meaning of Marx's theory of history is unclear. The various accounts of it are not all mutually compatible, and many are marred by incompleteness and inaccuracy. In general, Marx's thought is the subject of vigorous disputation, and there is a maze of conflicting authority. Marx himself is not entirely responsible for this state of affairs. For while the study of Marx has

grown more sophisticated over the years, high standards of scholarship have not always been maintained, and a slackness persists which one imagines would not be tolerated in other fields. The complex causes of this need not be sought here, but Marx has clearly been difficult to examine dispassionately. The requirements of the book trade have, in addition, encouraged rather one-sided, "novel" treatments of Marx. In any case, where patient examination has been required, individual flights of fancy have been indulged; where reasoned and close exegesis has been needed, textual infidelity has triumphed.

Before commenting on the specific problems with which I shall be concerned, a few points must be made to avoid confusion about the nature of this project. Although I handle the theory sympathetically, my intention is not to defend it or revise it; rather, I attempt to excavate what Marx's theory says, unpack its meaning, explore its nuances, and highlight some of its internal difficulties. I treat historical materialism, basically, as an empirical, scientific theory (or as an attempt to be such a theory). This is the way, I believe, that Marx himself understood it.

This might be thought to beg the question: Was Marx actually doing what he thought he was doing? That is, it is possible that while Marx claimed or actually believed himself to be offering a scientific theory of history, he was in fact only putting window dressing on some metaphysical views. For instance, some secularized version of Judaeo-Christian eschatology or a normative theory of alienation might be thought to underlie historical materialism.

While the materialist conception of history may well have resided in Marx's head alongside of a variety of ethical and other commitments, I cannot accept the position that historical materialism must be understood or evaluated only in terms of some supposed philosophical framework. Although Marx's theory raises certain philosophical issues, I do not believe it profitable to see the theory as derived from some imputed metaphysic. However, it is not part of my thesis to demonstrate that the Marx of "scientific" historical materialism is the "real" Marx. There is cer-

tainly an empirical side to Marx—he and most of his followers have thought so—and it is this with which I shall deal. Since one cannot really deny that Marx does appear to offer such a theory (the controversial question is whether it is really the most fundamental aspect of Marx's thought), it is legitimate, and I believe important, to explore the theory within its own frame of reference. Similarly, one may find it valuable to examine *Capital*, if one wishes, strictly as an economics text.

An apparently empirical theory can (and indeed must) be appraised apart from its metaphysical backdrop or its author's nonempirical beliefs. If the theory is scientifically untenable, its philosophical embodiment makes no difference: a good metaphysic cannot compensate for a bad empirical theory. On the other hand, if the theory (or parts of it) were to be found scientifically fruitful, it could be dissociated from its philosophical base. In treating historical materialism as an empirical theory (since this is the fashion in which Marx tenders it), I admittedly abstract it from other significant and engaging aspects of Marx's perspective. For example, his "scientific" vision of the evolution of man's social relations in response to expanding productive capacity also conveys the more "spiritual" story of man's alienation in class society from his true social being, which is to be realized in the communist future. Insofar as this second meaning is built into Marx's conception of history, though, what one makes of it will be influenced by one's evaluation of historical materialism as a scientific theory.

Of course, the danger is that Marx's thought may be misrepresented: that is, that one will take it to be essentially economic or social-scientific when in fact Marx was attempting something else. The reader may well feel that crucial features of Marx are neglected when *Capital* is treated as only an economics treatise, or when, as in this book, his theory of history is divorced from his apparently normative beliefs or from his theory of alienation. Nevertheless, what I intend to offer is an analysis of one portion of the empirical side of Marx's thought. The fact that this side has traditionally been taken to be that which is distinctive of

Marx may enhance this essay, but my study is not undermined if such a “scientific” conception of Marx turns out to be misguided.

Few others have attended closely enough to historical materialism, and that is good reason for sticking to the topic at hand—rather than undertaking yet another ambitious, all-encompassing treatise on Marx. It is this gap in the literature which I hope to fill partially myself and to encourage others to work on. I shall not, however, discuss the whole of Marx’s thinking on history; rather, I treat only one aspect of it. I am concerned with Marx’s general infrastructural model of historical change, with the elements that provide history’s unity and push it forward. That is, I deal with the economic dynamic, the interplay of productive forces and relations of production, which Marx understood to underlie historical change and evolution. This theme is important precisely because historical materialism itself assigns explanatory primacy to this particular dynamic. Though the theory directs one’s attention to this nexus, among students of Marx there is neither concurrence about the meaning of the basic terms involved nor agreement about the manner in which history’s fundamental momentum is provided.

While the territory to be investigated here is not large, it is nevertheless crucial ground for the reconstruction of Marx’s theory of history. It would not be too misleading to see this entire essay as a struggle to elucidate a portion of that dense statement by Marx of his own view in the “Preface” to *The Critique of Political Economy*. I undertake to sift more finely than has hitherto been attempted two central concepts of Marx’s theory, to unravel the evolutionary dynamic which is basic to Marx’s perspective, and to trace its operation through the specifics of both Marx’s analysis of capitalism and his reflections on pre-capitalist history. What is necessary is careful exegesis and a more even-handed presentation of Marx’s theory, one which does not omit its lacunae and inconsistencies; this I aim to provide.

Chapter One probes the concepts of Produktivkräfte and

Produktionsverhältnisse. By means of textual analysis, their meaning for Marx is fully explicated, and they are assigned a place within his larger perception of society. Further, it is argued that these concepts are neither incoherent nor inconsistent, as some have supposed. On this basis, Chapter Two delineates the character of Marx's historical theory and defends its basic intelligibility. Unlike most contemporary exponents of Marx, I champion a technological-determinist interpretation.

The next two chapters show how Marx envisioned his dialectic as clothed in history. Chapter Three depicts the transition from capitalism to socialism in terms of my previous discussion. How this transformation is actuated by a conflict between the forces and relations of production is revealed, and this account is then connected with the role played in Marx's thought by the proletariat and by dialectics. Chapter Four traces Marx's grasp of the evolutionary course of pre-capitalist history. While indicating the limits of Marx's insight, this treatment allows for a more accurate understanding of his general perspective. Marx was a student of history, but his comprehension of its actual path has not previously been surveyed with a close enough eye to his theoretical commitments.

Chapter Five reviews some of the problems with Marx's productive-force determinism, and concludes with some reflections on the scientific evaluation of his legacy. In such a fashion, then, the basic contours of Marx's historical materialism may be more sharply delineated and our command of it strengthened.

I do not exhaust the subject of historical materialism, but I do claim to present, accurately and scrupulously, the core of that theory and to show how Marx interpreted history in terms of it; to my knowledge this has never been accomplished. As intimated above, I maintain a "deterministic" interpretation of his theory, which credits the forces of production with the determining role in history, and I attempt to illuminate more precisely the primacy of the productive forces and their explanatory role within historical materialism. Such a version of Marx seems

to have enjoyed currency among Marx's early and "orthodox" followers (notably Plekhanov), although they never subjected the theory to close enough critical scrutiny.

Most contemporary writers, however, are unhappy with such an old-fashioned, deterministic, and evolutionary rendering of Marx. Commentators of all stripes agree on its vulgarity, and each in his own way has sought to make Marx's theory less contentious and more palatable. Despite the sophistication of this work, the price has generally been a less accurate—and less interesting—account of Marx's theory of history. What I reprove such interpreters for, then, is their method of delivering Marx from his critics. To concede, for instance, that the notion of a determining factor in history is incoherent and then to argue that Marx must have something else in view is to kill Marx with kindness. Marx was surely concerned to say more than simply that the economic base is important, or that everything is related to everything. Since I will later be trying to show exactly to what Marx's theory commits him, I need not expand on this here. I only announce that I will be offering a more "fundamentalist" interpretation of Marx than many friends of Marx have felt comfortable defending.² But by simultaneously showing the extent to which Marx's theory of history can be upheld against his critics, I believe that I have done him no disservice.

Before going on, a few procedural comments must be made. First, this essay does not enter into the debate about the relation between the "young" and the "old" Marx—in what sense(s) they are disparate or consonant, and which represents the "real" Marx. Historical materialism, as it was evolved around the time of *The German Ideology* and subsequently elaborated, is the province of Marx's mature thought; generally speaking, I shall not be concerned with earlier adumbrations of this theory. Nor do I examine the development of Marx's materialist conception. Changes in Marx's ideas are noted where they are germane, but I do not offer an intellectual biography.

Secondly, I am concerned with Marx's own theory of history

and not with later interpretations of it, except insofar as these are relevant to the comprehension of Marx's own position. Marx's intellectual relation with Engels is complex and deserves separate study. While I am cognizant of their different tastes and abilities, I find no systematic divergences between them in the subject under consideration. On some points Engels' authority constitutes the only guide to Marx's thought, but Engels' statements are not necessarily Marx's burdens, and I strive to employ Engels' evidence judiciously.

Finally, I am occasionally obliged to quote extensively from Marx, both to document my own interpretation and to allow my points to be expounded through Marx's own words. I endeavor to render Marx as being uniform and clear whenever this is possible without violating his meaning; frequently, I make this effort by defending him against a critic or a misguided votary.

CHAPTER ONE

The Anatomy of Production

IN 1857, in a rough manuscript intended to introduce the *Grundrisse*, Marx included the following statement in a list of points to be kept in mind: "5. *Dialectic of the concepts productive force (means of production) and relation of production*, the limits of *this dialectical connection*, which does not abolish the real differences, have to be defined."¹ Unfortunately, Marx never really proceeded to expand upon this note by explicating his conception of "productive forces" and "relations of production." This deficiency is striking: although these two concepts constitute the centerpiece of historical materialism, they are rarely wielded with precision, even by those who embrace this theory. Still, Marx's writings do unfold the "dialectic" of these two concepts, and this chapter proposes to go some way toward elucidating them. This labor should lay the foundation for the reconstruction, in later chapters, of Marx's model of historical change as it applies to the transformation of specific social formations. This, in turn, should provide a fuller and more accurate specification of the core of the materialist theory of history than has heretofore been offered.

It has become rather fashionable to blame Marx for failing to outline clearly his concepts for us (and his sympathizers have advanced many excuses on his behalf for this), but although

Marx did not always employ his concepts as deftly as one might wish, this point has been greatly overstated. Bertell Ollman, to take an extreme example, believes that if Marx means what common sense and ordinary language suggest he means, then "Marx is not only guilty of ridiculous exaggeration but of a gross ignorance of history and the simplest facts of economic life."² Marx, it appears, did not use his words in anything like the mundane way in which most mortals do; accordingly, Ollman dedicates himself to the unenviable task of excavating what Marx really had in mind, but was apparently unable to state.

A principle underlying this essay is that, generally speaking, Marx means what he says: there is no need to explain this in terms of some alleged "underlying" philosophy or a unique use of words. I do not claim that there are no ambiguities, discrepancies, puzzles, or plain mistakes in Marx; I merely contend that with some effort Marx's ideas can be made reasonably consistent and coherent—or, where that is not possible, that the problems in them can at least be identified. Difficulties in examining the content and interrelation of the above-mentioned concepts do not result from Marx's language per se, but rather because the concepts themselves are so basic to his theoretical perspective. They are of the essence of Marx's conception of society; as a result, their consistent and full explication takes time and care.

To adequately grasp historical materialism, one must understand its conceptual furniture. The concepts "productive forces" and "relations of production" are fundamental to Marx's perception of history—in particular, to his view of the dynamics of historical change and social evolution. Their clarification is a necessary task. Because of the importance of getting a handle on these notions, and because of the confused way in which they are frequently conceived, I am obliged to proceed slowly and with thorough documentation. Still, I do not claim to be able to prove my definitions, although I maintain that they more comfortably accord with Marx's usage and overall intentions than any rival

interpretation. With a thinker as complex and fecund as Marx, it is not always possible to give incontrovertible and rigid meanings to his terms, and in any case one cannot suppose that this could be accomplished by narrow textual discussion alone—without reference to his purpose in employing his concepts and to their role within his theory.

The fact that both of the concepts which this chapter examines can be made intelligible and consistent is the reason for rebuking commentators like Ollman for yielding the field so quickly to Marx's critics: there is no need to plead a special case for Marx's use of words when his concepts are coherent. I hope also to show that they are not so intractable.

Productive Forces

Productive forces are those elements which are both basic and essential to the production process, not in the wide sense of including all activities or factors which are necessary for society to carry on production, but in the narrower sense of the simple factors of the labor process—that is, those elements which analysis reveals as part of the immediate production process itself. The labor process is the process of producing material use-values. With the help of instruments, man's activity effects an alteration, designed from commencement, on the material worked: a product results. Any labor process involves labor-power and means of production; these elements will be seen to constitute what Marx understands as the "productive forces."

Means of Production

The means of production (Produktionsmittel) are identified by Marx as the material factors of production,³ the objective conditions of labor,⁴ and labor's material and means; they are indispensable for its "realization."⁵ Marx declares that both the instruments of labor (Arbeitsmittel) and the object of labor (Arbeitsgegenstand) are "means of production,"⁶ noting the apparent paradox that uncaught fish are thus means of production