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# The Validity of Karl Marx's Theory of Historical Materialism

Kaleb Shimp

**ABSTRACT.** Marx's theory of historical materialism uses the evolution of productive forces and class struggle to explain history. With the fall of communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many components of historical materialism have come under fire. This paper is a defense of the validity of historical materialism and concludes that some of the arguments against Marx's theory are unfounded, while others still hold weight. What remains is a broad view of history that still has value.

## I. Introduction

Karl Marx is known throughout the world for his theories, revolutionary writings, and association with communism. The competition between communist and capitalist countries defined the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because Marx was the most prominent figure in developing this antagonism, he had a profound effect on the past century. At the core of Marx's teachings is historical materialism and an interpretation of it that communism is inevitable.

The theory of historical materialism is based upon the primacy of economic forces in social change throughout history, and that these economic forces will continue to transform the world until it reaches its culmination in communism. Marx's longtime friend and co-author Friedrich Engels wrote that Marx "discovered the law of development of human history" in much the same way that Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature (Marx and Engels 1983, 69). This interpretation of the past could transform multiple fields of thought in much the same way Darwin's discoveries of natural selection and evolution did.

Historical materialism, however, has come under scrutiny in the past three to four decades. Every attempt at a Marxian society has either failed (e.g. Soviet Union) or drifted away from Marx's teachings towards the capitalist norms of the majority of the world (e.g. China). In a sense, capitalism has won the competition. The apparent failure of communism has opened the door for criticism of Marx and historical materialism. Many economists and sociologists question the validity and relevance of historical materialism. With this in mind, I set out to answer the question

of whether historical materialism is still relevant following the demise of socialism and communism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The literature pertaining to this question is quite voluminous, but through my research of Marxists, Marxian critics, and Marx himself, I have come to the conclusion that historical materialism is still relevant and plausible.

## **II. Foundations for Historical Materialism**

In order to truly understand the critiques of historical materialism, a thorough explanation of the individual building blocks, dialectics and materialism, is required. I will explain historical materialism when these two components are fully defined. The old adage, “You have to crawl before you can walk” comes to mind. Understanding dialectics and materialism will make understanding historical materialism easier.

### **A. THE DIALECTIC**

Knowledge of Hegel and his impact on Marx is necessary to understand almost all of Marx’s theories. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was a well-known German philosopher who lived from 1770-1831. One of his largest contributions to philosophy was his dialectical method. This process of thinking is evident throughout Marx’s writing and is the foundation of Marxism. The underlying idea of the dialectical process is that mankind is separated or alienated from the Absolute, and the historical process is man’s gradual movement towards the Absolute, or, in Hegel’s mind, God. According to Wolff, alienation is the idea that two things that belong together come apart (2003, 29). In this case, man and the Absolute belong together, they are separated, and the dialectical process will gradually bring them together over the course of history. The dialectical process aids man’s progressive movement towards the Absolute by relieving man of his ignorance and increasing his self-awareness by gradually replacing man’s perception of reality with newer and truer forms (Freedman 1990, 12). Every time man’s perception of reality is transformed into a newer version, man takes one step closer to the Absolute. Eventually, reality, as man perceives it, will evolve to a point where the alienation of man from the Absolute no longer exists. According to Hegel, the state of reality where man and the Absolute are reunited is the end of history (Ibid 1990, 12)

The newer and truer forms of reality that lead man to the end of

history are created through the interaction between the thesis and antithesis. These are stages that exist in contradiction to each other. Contradiction in dialectics is a difficult idea to grasp due to its deviation from the logical meaning of contradiction (Heilbroner 1981, 41). By the logical definition, the contradiction of something is its opposite. For example, the contradiction of being is not-being and the contradiction of A is not-A (Ibid 1981, 41). In dialectics, contradiction has a relational meaning. Contradictions in dialectics are the oppositions that are necessary for and yet destructive of each other (Ibid 1981, 39). For example, a master is the contradiction of a servant and vice versa. A person cannot be a master without a servant and a person cannot be a servant without a master. Both a master and a servant can only be defined in relation to each other (Ibid 1981, 36). Marx used this understanding of contradiction to define class struggles through the antagonism of a ruling class and a lower class as I will discuss later. This is the type of contradictory relationship that is present between the thesis and antithesis. The thesis is a stage, as is the antithesis. Marx described the ruling class of society as the thesis and the lower class as the antithesis. The thesis and antithesis, however, can be applied to any analytical process, not exclusively as Marx used them. For example, a room may be brightly lit, but this can only be comprehended relative to a dark room. This is a dialectical relationship. A person that spends his entire life in a single room that is always lit the same will have no sense of brightness or darkness. In this example, brightness is the thesis and darkness is the antithesis. They contradict and can only be defined in relation to each other. In this instance, the interaction of brightness and darkness does not lead to a truer form of light. Instead, the combination of brightness and darkness forms a level of light that exists somewhere along the spectrum between bright and dark. This combination, or compromise, is the synthesis, another stage in the Hegelian dialectic.

The thesis, antithesis, and synthesis are the actors of the dialectic. The thesis and antithesis compete with each other until a tipping-point is reached and the existing thesis is overthrown and replaced with the synthesis. In the bright/dark example, brightness and darkness interact and form a perception of light that is a combination of the two. The combination of the thesis and antithesis form the synthesis with both the thesis and antithesis contributing. The synthesis created through this combination then becomes the new thesis (Freedman 1990, 12). The newly formed thesis is on a higher level of development or understanding

than the previous thesis. This new thesis is a truer form because the synthesis combines the good of both the thesis and antithesis, allowing the thesis to benefit from the contradiction. Contradiction is a necessary condition for advancement because “You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough” (Elster 1986, 34).

The newer thesis is another step towards the Absolute (Freedman 1990, 12). The newly formed thesis, however, is not alone. Another antithesis exists. These two stages will again interact and the process will start all over again until another synthesis is formed. Even though a thesis closer to the Absolute is created following every interaction of the thesis and antithesis, an antithesis will always be present until the Absolute is reached. Every replacement of the thesis with the synthesis is just a small step towards the Absolute. This process will continue until a thesis is formed where no antithesis exists. With no contradiction, the thesis will remain because it has connected man with the Absolute and eliminated alienation. Once this point is reached, the dialectical process is over (Ibid 1990, 12).

In summation, according to Hegel’s dialectic, man’s perception of reality is in a constant state of flux due to the unstable coexistence and successive resolution of the thesis and antithesis (Heilbroner 1981, 35). With every successive resolution, a new state of reality is formed that is better than the previous state. Man is constantly on a path of improvement through the interaction of opposites, gradually moving closer and closer to the Absolute until no contradiction exists to force change in the present state or thesis. At this point, the Absolute is reached and, according to Hegel, so is the end of history (Freedman 1990, 12).

## B. FEUERBACH’S MATERIALISM

Even though Marx believed strongly in the teachings of Hegel, he did not completely accept Hegel’s philosophy. Hegel was an idealist. In fact, he is considered one of the founders of German idealism. Idealism is the notion that reality is based upon ideas or the mind. Descartes’s “I think therefore I am” is one of the most famous quotes pertaining to idealism. Marx disliked idealism and called it the “mystificatory side of the Hegelian dialectic” (Marx 1990, 102). To Hegel, the thesis and antithesis interact in the abstract and man’s movement towards the Absolute is not something that occurs in the material world. Marx thought the interaction

occurred in real life. The actions of people, not ideas, move man closer to the Absolute. Marx flipped Hegel's dialectic "on its head" in order to "discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell" (Ibid 1990, 103). Marx believed that Hegel's dialectic made sense, but that Hegel failed to develop the process in the correct realm, the realm of man.

In rejecting idealism, Marx developed his view of the world based on materialism. Materialism is the opposite of idealism. According to materialists, matter is the only thing that can be proven to exist. Matter precedes everything and the material world comes before all consciousness. Marx said, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Marx and Engels 1983, 160). The Absolute in Marx's mind is not God or some supreme idea developed within man's consciousness. To Marx, the Absolute is the material condition of freedom. Alienation will be eliminated through the dialectical process not when man is reunited with some deity that may not even exist, but when man achieves true freedom. I will discuss Marx's notion of freedom later.

Marx's specific form of materialism is based upon the work of a former student of Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach studied at the University of Berlin under Hegel beginning in 1823. Feuerbach's first work, published anonymously, was *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*. He denied the immortality of the human soul and concluded that Earth would be man's final resting place (Kedourie 1995, 153-4). Feuerbach's thoughts are of an obviously materialistic nature because Feuerbach is not willing to admit to the existence of anything that does not exist materially. Man was born on Earth, he will die on Earth, and no afterlife awaits him.

Feuerbach continued his materialistic philosophy with another work entitled *The Essence of Christianity*. In this work, Feuerbach argued that the reason human beings resemble God is not because God created man in his image, but because man created God in his image (Wolff 2003, 17). He also said that man has taken all that is good within him and bestowed it upon God, alienating himself from his greatest qualities. Only by breaking the chains of religion can man live the life he was truly meant to live (Kedourie 1995, 157). Marx agreed with Feuerbach's thoughts on religion as he asserts in *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a

heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people. The overcoming of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. (Marx and Engels 1983, 115)

Religion, to Marx, is man's attempt to ease the misery in life caused by alienation. To achieve peace of mind, man creates a false god that he connects with. The god created is not the true Absolute, but by uniting with a created Absolute, man achieves an "illusory happiness". To achieve "real happiness", man must discover the alienation causing the unhappiness.

Unlike Feuerbach, however, Marx did not think that identifying the problem was enough. Feuerbach believed that once religion was exposed as a sham, his work was done and religion would gradually dissipate (Wolff 2003, 19). Marx was not satisfied. He wanted more than just to understand the conditions that have caused religion. He wanted to remove the conditions (Ibid 2003, 21). Marx called the materialism of Feuerbach "contemplative materialism" because it considered "sensuous contemplation" to be the primary way people interact with the world (Marx and Engels 1998, 572-3). Feuerbach's materialism failed to recognize the importance of human activity within the material world. Marx expresses his belief in the third of his eleven *Theses on Feuerbach*:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing..... forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. (Ibid 1998, 572-3)

The conditions that have caused religion will not be removed through "sensuous contemplation", but through human activity. Man must change the circumstances of his life to continue down the path towards the Absolute. "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (Ibid 1998, 574).

### **III. Get to the point already....What is Historical Materialism?**

It is time to unite the two building blocks into the theory of historical

materialism. To avoid any confusion, when referring to historical materialism in this paper, I am strictly speaking of the theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Since Marx and Engels initially laid-out historical materialism, additions have been made and different interpretations have been formulated by men such as Leon Trotsky, Eduard Bernstein, Karl Kautsky, Georgi Plekhanov, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Nikolai Bukharin, and countless others. These men have made many notable contributions to what Marxist Louis Althusser has dubbed the “scientific continent” of social and historical thought (Baltas 1999, 52). To maintain consistency, I have chosen to ignore these additions and focus on the original source.

Historical materialism asserts that economic forces are the primary forces that propel man through history as social classes interact. Economic interactions are how man relates to the material world. Man changes the material world, not with thought and conceptualization, but with picks, shovels, ploughs, diggers, looms and lathes (Wolff 2003, 28). Man has to labor in order to survive. Labor physically changes the world, causing the economic forces to develop as man is able to gain more and more control over his environment. For example, farmers at one point used animal-driven plows to plant crops in order to make a living. Eventually, tractors that performed the same task as animals, but much more efficiently, were developed and gave farmers greater control of their environment. The tractor was simply a development in the economic forces. As economic forces develop, class struggles become more intense.

Class struggles provide the contradiction that causes the dialectical process to work in Marx's theory. Two classes, ruling and lower, struggle against each other until one eventually wins and becomes the new ruling class. From this new ruling class, another lower class will develop, continuing the process. Marx and Engels clearly declare the importance of classes in history with the first sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (2005, 7). Classes develop from the conflict between the economic/productive forces, relations of production, and superstructure within society. Marx's clearest representation of the interactions between productive forces, productive relations, and superstructure is in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their life, men 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 **forces of production**. The sum total of these **relations of production** constitutes the economic structure of society --- the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political **superstructure** and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The **mode of production** of material life determines the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material **productive forces** in society 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 have been at work before. From forms of development of the productive forces these **relations** turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense **superstructure** is more or less rapidly transformed. (Marx and Engels 1983, 159-60)

As the productive forces continue to improve, the relations of production (as Marx says, these are for the most part property rights) become a burden (in Marx's words a "fetter") on the improving productive forces, not allowing the productive forces to continue on their path of improvement. The superstructure is the legal, philosophical, religious, and political environment in which the productive forces and productive relations interact. The superstructure exists in order to help the productive relations.

Classes develop due to the conflict between the productive forces and productive relations. The productive forces and productive relations do not have a dialectical contradiction. The contradiction is only present between the ruling and lower classes. Between the productive forces and relations of production exists only a conflict and the presence of conflict does not mean the presence of contradiction by the dialectical definition (Heilbroner 1981, 39-40). The conflict between the productive forces and the relations of production only provide the basis by which classes develop.

The productive forces are always changing and improving. As man

labors in the world, the division of labor grows and man finds new and better ways to master his environment. This improvement will benefit the lower class because with greater control of the environment comes a greater capability of obtaining beneficial resources. The ruling class, however, is in an advantageous position and would like the status quo to remain. The current relations of production and superstructure of the society exist to serve the will of the ruling class. The ruling class determines the distribution of goods within the society and they have no desire to change the relations of production.

The lower class, on the other hand, is not content with the current situation and would like to take advantage of the ever-improving productive forces. The ruling class prevents this from happening. This contradiction of classes culminates in social revolution. The lower class overthrows the ruling class and forms new relations of production that are better suited to work with the productive forces. The superstructure changes with the relations of production and the new relations of production and superstructure serve the interests of the new ruling class. The new thesis will stay in existence until the productive relations and productive forces are again no longer compatible. The incompatibility will cause another lower class to form in contradiction to the upper class, beginning the antagonism all over again. Within every mode of production lies its own downfall.

#### **IV. Marx's Modes of Production**

Marx and Engels identified three occasions when the lower class has overthrown the ruling class and created a new mode of production. These transitions occurred between Marx's four modes of production: the Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and capitalist (1983, 161). Others have given different names to these stages, but the meanings are unchanged. The Asiatic mode of production was the earliest form, and is also known as primitive communism. In this mode, the productive forces were hardly developed at all and property was held in common. This mode of production existed early in mankind's history when population was small, the division of labor was elementary and people lived by "hunting and fishing, by the rearing of beasts or, in the highest stage, agriculture." (Ibid 1983, 165).

The replacement of this mode of production came about by the gradual increase in population, growth of wants and extension of external

relations such as war and/or trade (Ibid 1983, 165). These are increases in the productive forces that caused people to stray from the commune. Marx believed the survival of the commune was dependent upon new members growing up under the “presupposed objective conditions” of the commune (Marx 1993, 486-7). As population and external relations increased, the relations of production under the Asiatic mode grew weaker as people became more independent of the commune. The improving forces of production created a collective surplus that began to erode the “presupposed objective conditions” by appealing to the increasing wants of the people (Laibman 2006, 189). With the “presupposed objective conditions” diminishing, the commune became weaker. The growing independence of the individual within the commune meant that it was not possible for the Asiatic mode of production to survive (Marx 1993, 486-7). Eventually, individuals were able to break from the commune to obtain their share of the growing surplus. With this break, the communal system was destroyed and the Asiatic mode of production was replaced. What followed was the ancient mode of production.

#### A. THE ANCIENT MODE OF PRODUCTION: SLAVES AND EXPANSION

In the ancient mode of production, classes were prevalent. The ruling class controlled the surplus and, therefore, controlled the lower class (Marx 1993, 486). In this mode, slavery was the most predominant materialization of class struggle as the coercion and restraint of the lower class was very direct (Laibman 2006, 189). The ruling class physically owned the lower class. The division of labor was still underdeveloped. Slaves had little to no motivation to advance the productive forces by increasing their labor productivity. Any increase in productivity would only benefit the ruling class. Plus, the brutal conditions that slaves endured led to short life spans. Circumstances forced the productive forces to grow in other ways.

Because slaves were not a self-maintaining resource and increasing labor productivity was unlikely, the ancient mode of production’s productive forces grew outward or extensively (Ibid 2006, 190-1). This expansion involved fighting wars to obtain slaves and clearing forests to cater to the growing agricultural holdings and construction projects needed to serve an expanding population and surplus-hungry ruling class

(Ibid 2006, 191). This expansion, however, led to the demise of the ancient mode of production. With an ever-expanding geographic reach, the ruling class had to devote more and more of the surplus it received to maintaining control of slaves (Ibid 2006, 191). Eventually, with the ruling class spread too thin, the ancient states that supported the ruling class succumbed to invasion and the ancient mode of production failed. The fall of the Roman Empire shows the problem with the ancient mode quite clearly. Rome grew far too large to effectively defend its borders and eventually fell to outside invaders.

#### B. FEUDALISM: SERFS AND THE GROWING NEED FOR MARKETS

Feudalism followed the ancient mode of production. Feudalism was characterized by serfdom and the guilds. In the countryside, the lower class was not directly owned by the ruling class. Instead, the lower class was tied to the land owned by the ruling class (Marx and Engels 1983, 167). These people worked the land for the lord of the land or they paid rent to the lord and worked the land for their own benefit. The surplus the lords obtained was extracted from the land through the serfs. In the towns, serfdom took the form of guilds. The guilds were groups of craftsmen such as stone-cutters or glassmakers. In the towns, instead of being tied to land, individual craftsmen and their labor were tied to the guilds.

The coercion within feudalism was much less direct than in the ancient mode (Laibman 2006, 192). Lords maintained control over serfs not through shackles and whips, but through ideology. The serfs felt an obligation to work, pay rent, and protect the land because they were in a system bigger than themselves in which the lords ruled and the serfs served (Ibid 2006, 193). Even though the serfs were glorified slaves to the land, unlike the slaves of the ancient mode, the serfs had certain legal rights within feudalism. The ruling class owned the land, but the lower class had a right that could not be taken from them to work on the land (Ibid 2006, 192). More importantly, the serfs owned some of the means of production.

Feudalism brought about a shift in the development of the productive forces. Instead of growing extensively, because the lower class owned certain means of production, the productive forces grew intensively (Ibid 2006, 193). The serfs did not own the land, but they owned the tools that they used on the land. With fixed labor obligations or rent, the serfs had

an incentive to increase individual labor productivity and to care for their means of production because any production in excess of what they were obligated to perform was surplus the serf could keep (Ibid 2006, 193). Therefore, the productive forces of feudalism grew through the increased productivity of labor as the serfs and guild members found better, more efficient ways to earn their living. These innovations would eventually be the downfall of feudalism.

With individual innovations improving the productive forces, serfs found themselves in the peculiar position of having surpluses of their own. Instead of living at subsistence, serfs were gradually able to produce more than they needed. To benefit from the surplus, markets had to be developed where the serfs could sell their excess goods. From this individualized form of surplus grew the first forms of market relations and capitalism (Ibid 2006, 193-4). Even though trade has existed since the dawn of civilization, David Laibman summarizes how individual surplus in feudalism to give rise to capitalism:

Markets are not an idea waiting to happen, or an invention of the Western European 17<sup>th</sup> century. Trade is present in all known periods of human existence, either in the “interstices” of social production, as in the European high Middle Ages, or flourishing, as in the trading civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean and China, or the modern capitalist world. The potential of markets to encompass ever wider segments of the PRs, via the emergence of a “home” market in means of production and consumption for the majority of the population, however, rests on the individual surplus occasioned by intensive PF development, which occurs specifically under feudalism. (2006, 193-4)

In order to sell their surpluses, serfs needed markets. From this need developed the ruling and lower class antagonism. The ruling class did not need a market to extract their surplus but the lower class did. Feudalism fell when the lower class overthrew the ruling class and established market-based productive relations to further the development of the productive forces. This signified the beginning of capitalism.

#### C. CAPITALISM: COMMODITIES AND INVISIBLE COERCION

Capitalism is the current mode of production. It is a mode dominated by private property and markets. Businesses own machines, buildings, and

tools and use these to produce different items that can be sold in markets to make a profit. That is the general premise. It is also a mode characterized by the takeover of commodity-forms and rapid growth in productive forces. In capitalism, individuals are not tied to land, guilds, or owned in any way. On the surface, they are free to make any decision they see fit. In order to make a living, individuals generally choose to be employed by businesses where they earn a wage in return for their labor. They essentially sell their labor to the business. This is an illustration of the takeover of commodity-form as labor is put into its commodity-form where businesses compare it to another commodity, money, and determine what amounts these commodities will trade for based upon the work the individual will perform. In order to increase productivity and the surplus they extract, businesses offer incentives to their workers in the form of promotions, bonuses, stock options, etc. The increase in productive forces provided by these incentives help the businesses in the pursuit of profits and the incentives themselves help the workers to provide for themselves. Everything seems balanced. Productive forces increase, workers earn a wage, and no one is coerced.

But if one looks closer, underlying the exchange of labor is another form of coercion and class struggle that is more hidden than the previous modes of production. The lower class is forced to work for the upper class because of the necessity of survival. David Laibman wrote:

The capitalist relation of exploitation is unique... its key elements, labor-power and capital, both assume the form of commodities. This enables a structure of domination and surplus extraction to assume an outward form of personal (individual) equality and voluntary (rational) choice, a form that is not merely a disguise or illusion, but is objectively present in the social experience of the actors in this drama. Understood in this way, the capitalist market is a uniquely powerful engine of coercion and exploitation. (2006, 198)

The capitalist lower class is coerced into working for the capitalist ruling class. Even though members of the lower class have their choice of which employer to sell their labor to, the fact remains that they must sell their labor to survive. Once their labor is sold, members of the lower class remains stuck in their role and they cannot escape without losing their means of livelihood (Marx and Engels 1983, 177). Although it is not obvious, class antagonism still exists within capitalism.

#### D. THE END OF HISTORY

According to Marx and Engels, capitalism is the product of a long course of development with social revolutions transitioning between modes of production (2005, 9). In every mode, the ruling and lower classes battle each other for the right to determine the relations of production. With each new mode of production, another contradiction develops that will ultimately cause the demise of the mode, that will “burst asunder” the production relations and in turn, the superstructure (Ibid 2005, 12). This process will continue until no contradictions exist, at which point the Absolute has been reached.

Marx did not believe that capitalism was the final resting point of history. Marx thought this cycle would continue until capitalism was overthrown and replaced with communism (Marx and Engels 1983, 161). According to Marx, this is the form of society that will end all alienation and bring about the true Absolute. The true absolute is freedom. Freedom meant the abolishment of classes and coercion. In communism nobody would be forced, implicitly or explicitly, into any role. Nobody would be consumed with the extraction of surplus. Instead, people would be able to “do one thing to-day and another to-morrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner... without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic” (Ibid 1983, 177). Division of labor and private property would be abolished and man’s labor would no longer be a burden necessary for survival. Labor would be man’s way of freely interacting with each other to fulfill their combined needs (Wolff 2003, 27-8). Man would live the life he was meant to live, free of alienation and in a communal society (Marx and Engels 1988, 102-103).

### **V. Historical Materialism’s Difficulties**

#### A. COMMUNISM

There have been many critics of historical materialism. The primary criticism within the last few decades is the result of the fall of socialism and communism. Because some versions of historical materialism predicted socialism and communism would follow capitalism, many have interpreted the fall of such regimes as evidence enough that historical materialism is false.

This, however, is an unfounded assertion. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy: Preface*, Marx and Engels wrote:

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 itself. Therefore, mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the task itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. (1983, 160-1)

Capitalism was not even close to being fully developed before the creation of communist states such as the Soviet Union. Russia was essentially still a feudal society at the time of their revolution. In fact, Laibman believes capitalism is currently in the third of his four stage model of capitalist development where the lower class is not fully developed and capitalist accumulation is not complete, two pre-requisites for the transition to socialism/communism (2005, 297-308). The world has not even seen a true test of historical materialism. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was an example of overzealousness on the part of revolutionaries. To point to the apparent failure of historical materialism in practice during the 20<sup>th</sup> century provides little evidence of the theory's lack of validity. In fact, it only strengthens it.

## B. FEASIBILITY OF SOCIALISM/COMMUNISM

Another issue arising from the supposed inevitability of communism is a more economic question. The feasibility of a socialist economy has long been debated. From a historical materialist perspective, in order for socialism/communism to follow capitalism, the productive relations within socialism/communism would have to use the productive forces more efficiently than the productive relations of capitalism (Howard and King 1994, 136-7). Otherwise, the socialism/communism productive relations would hinder the productive forces and not serve their purpose of advancing mankind. With this in mind, it is difficult to argue against the efficiency of capitalism and the markets. Achieving the conditions of Pareto efficiency without the use of prices, private property, and the



market is practically impossible (Ibid 1994. 139). It appears as though the efficiency necessary for socialism/communism to replace capitalism (or be instituted all together) cannot be achieved.

The inevitability of socialism or communism is a shortcoming of the theory of historical materialism. Marx addresses this shortcoming by asserting that every mode of production has its own economy and economic foundation (1993, 489). Economists generally measure economic efficiency with the Pareto conditions, but it is feasible to assert that the advent of socialism/communism could bring about a different, non-neoclassical way of measuring efficiency. But from a neo-classical standpoint, a socialist economy that does not in some way incorporate a market to allocate resources seems impossible. Socialists such as Oscar Lange have addressed this issue with the development of market socialism, but Marx thought the use of any kind of market would be unable to completely eliminate alienation (Howard and King 1994, 140-1).

This problem does not refute historical materialism. It is perfectly acceptable to agree with the principles of historical materialism without accepting the utopian vision of a future communist society (Runciman 1983, 214). Whether Marx is right or wrong about the eventual path of history is irrelevant. Marx may have gone a bit too far. He was a revolutionary at heart, as evidenced in *The Communist Manifesto*. He claimed to see the preconditions for socialism/communism in capitalism in the falling rate of profit and centralization of capital. On the other hand, maybe he just wanted socialism/communism to follow capitalism because capitalism was rough on Marx. In multiple letters to his friend Friedrich Engels, Marx asks for financial aid, and Marx, by all accounts, lived in relative poverty his whole life (Marx and Engels 1983, 27-52). In either case, a model is measured upon its ability to explain and predict. Historical materialism can be used to explain the past. It can also be used to predict, just maybe not to the extent that Marx used it. Historical materialism can predict that capitalism will be replaced, but what exactly will replace the current mode of production cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty.

### C. THE ISSUE OF ECONOMIC PRIMACY

While Marx held a degree in philosophy, it did not keep him from delving into multiple fields of thought. He is known in philosophy, economics,

and has been one of the most influential sociological thinkers. Sociologists in recent years, however, have become more and more unsatisfied with Marx's economic reductionism. Marx believed that economic forces developed through history and political, ideological, and military forces (i.e. the superstructure) developed subordinate to economic forces. Several sociologists now believe that there are multiple forces acting simultaneously and with varying degrees of strength. Michael Mann identified four sources of power: economic, ideological, military, and political (1986, 11). Ernest Gellner wrote that in order for economic forces to develop, the political and ideological balance of power must change in a way that allows the economic forces to develop, essentially giving primacy to ideological and political forces (1988, 131-2). These ideas have some logical sense.

"Men must be in a position to live in order to be able to make history" (Marx and Engels 1983, 171). Marx believed this to be the first premise of human existence (Ibid 1983, 171). In order for men to develop political systems, ideologies, and militaries, they must first develop their economic conditions. Maslow's hierarchy of needs shows this clearly. Achieving a condition where the species can survive, reproduce, and maintain itself is the goal of every species on the planet. Survival is and always will be the first need. To say that men mold their means of survival around secondary forces such as ideological and political makes little sense. Gellner and Mann point to certain instances within history that they believe show a lack of economic primacy. They are mistaken in what they see. Even when it appears as though a new ideology or political movement causes a change in the mode of production, this can only occur as a result of the productive forces growing beyond the productive relations (Ibid 1983, 175). The superstructure can affect the way the productive forces develop as the ancient and feudal modes demonstrate, but the superstructure only changes subordinate to the productive forces. Marx and Engels wrote, "...how nonsensical is the conception of history held hitherto, which neglects the real relationships and confines itself to high-sounding dramas of princes and states" (Ibid 1983, 179).

#### D. CLASS STRUGGLE: MOTOR OF HISTORY?

The dialectic relationship between the ruling and lower classes within historical materialism develop out of private property and the presence of

a surplus. A ruling class develops through its use of private property to obtain the surplus. Communism is supposed to get rid of all alienation by getting rid of the class antagonism. To do this, private property must be eliminated so a ruling class cannot develop to control the surplus. History leading up to communism is composed of the different modes of production where varying forms of private property and coercion create the class antagonism. The modes of production and their subsequent failures and replacements are all predicated on class struggle and revolution.

Some critics of historical materialism believe that class struggles have not had a uniform effect throughout history, with class playing a large role during certain periods and a smaller role in others (Mann 1986, 528-9). Michael Mann also argues that capitalism is an abnormally class-divided society and that earlier modes of production did not display this same attribute (1993, 26-7). Mann and some of his fellow sociologists point to historical examples that appear to show class struggles having a miniscule effect. Marx and Engels argued that all historical struggles, whether they be wars, assassinations, political restructurings, coup d'états, etc., are all manifestations of class struggles (1983, 177). Whether this is true or not is impossible to prove. For example, to reduce the Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage down to class struggle cannot be done.

The specific historical instances, however, can be explained if historical materialism is used in the way Marx and Engels intended. Marx developed historical materialism as a general guideline for interpreting history. He knew he had little historical knowledge to back up his theory. But looking at the past, he was able to see a rudimentary outline or flow that seemed to repeat itself in the form of successive modes of production. The transitions may be fuzzy, but the flow was discernible. While historical materialism may not explain every historical occurrence concretely, the four modes of production and their transitions show the development through classes and economic primacy. Interpreting historical materialism in this way has been viewed as defending it in a "blindly dogmatic way" or treating Marxist theory as "revealed dogma rather than empirical hypothesis" (Giddens 1995, 105; Walsh 1959, 304). Although this may be true, it does not negate the fact that historical materialism can explain the past, just not every instance.

## E. THE ASIATIC MODE OF PRODUCTION AND ITS FAULTS

The Asiatic mode of production has a double-meaning. In fact, some have created two similar but separate modes of production from the Asiatic mode. Instead of using primitive communism and the Asiatic mode hand-in-hand, a distinction exists between the two that has led some to think of them as completely different modes. Marx identified this difference, but stopped short of dividing the two. The difference between primitive communism and the Asiatic mode of production is, as the name indicates, that the Asiatic mode refers to what Marx considered special circumstances in Asia. In Marx's eyes, Asia was different from Europe and the rest of the world. In Asia, communal property and the relatively underdeveloped productive forces had remained predominant while the rest of the world advanced through other modes of production. This occurred, according to Marx, because the people within the Asiatic mode of production were more reluctant to become independent of the commune. In order for the Asiatic mode to be replaced, the "barrier" that restricts the independence of individuals in regard to the wishes of the commune must be "suspended" to allow the forces of production to be further developed (Marx and Engels 1993, 487). In the Asiatic mode, this "barrier" was stronger than in primitive communism. Marx described this difference in the two modes in the *Grundrisse*:

The Asiatic form necessarily hangs on most tenaciously and for the longest time. This is due to its presupposition that the individual does not become independent *vis-à-vis* the commune; that there is a self-sustaining circle of production, unity of agriculture and manufactures, etc. (1993, 486)

Some have used this distinction made by Marx to attack historical materialism. Anthony Giddens, in his book *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, calls historical materialism "Europocentric" (1995, 85). Giddens argues that Marx, like many other writers of his day, looked down on Asia as "barbarous" (1995, 85). Hence, the stagnation that Marx attributed to Asia, Giddens asserts, does not reflect the true situation of Asia, but instead is only a reflection of Marx's European bias (1995, 84-8).

It is true that Marx only fleetingly discussed societies outside of Europe. His primary focus was Germany, France, and Great Britain. In

fact, Marx dedicated only a handful of pages in *Capital*, *Grundrisse*, and *The German Ideology* to the discussion of non-European societies. Considering that these books are, roughly, a combined twenty-five hundred pages, the proportion of Marx's discussion does not coincide with the proportion of the world that is not European. Giddens goes on to say that Marx's incomplete look at Asian societies is a weakness within historical materialism because if the world is constantly changing and developing through contradictions, why is Asia stagnant?

It cannot be denied that Marx wrote very little about Oriental societies. This may be due either to a lack of information or a lack of caring. The quote from *Grundrisse*, however, can be used to illustrate why the Oriental societies are an exception. In order for the Asiatic mode of production to dissipate, a contradiction has to be present. In this state of underdeveloped productive forces, no contradiction exists. In the Asiatic mode of production, as with primitive communism, no classes exist; the only way for antagonistic classes to form is if the productive forces improve and a surplus is created. The presence of a surplus provides motivation for individuals to break from the commune in order to gain control of this surplus. These individuals capture the surplus and emerge into new social strata such as warrior castes, priesthoods, nobles and commoners (Laibman 2006, 186). The emergence of classes signifies an end to primitive communism. In the Asiatic mode of production, no surplus is present. Therefore, there is no motivation for individuals to break from the commune. There is a "self-sustaining circle of production, unity of agriculture and manufactures, etc." within the Oriental societies that prevent class formation (Marx 1993, 486).

The "self-sustaining circle of production" is why the Oriental societies remain unchanged. Marx describes this phenomenon in *Capital* when he discusses the ancient Indian communities. Within each of these communities, a division of labor exists where certain people perform certain tasks that provide for everyone within the small communities. When the population increases, a new community forms on vacant land (Marx 1990, 478). These communities are isolated. Because of this, the market is unchanged and people develop no new or additional wants. Hence, there is no upward pressure on the productive forces to satisfy the growing needs and wants of the market. Therefore, the Asiatic mode of production subsists. Giddens recognizes this by saying that the stagnation of productive forces due to circumstances within specific societies is consistent with Marx's work in *Grundrisse* (1995, 84). Still, Giddens and

many others feel that the productive forces do not “underlie the major episodic transitions” throughout history (1995, 84-5).

## VI. Conclusion

Historical materialism can be used to explain the past by dividing time into four modes of production: Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and capitalist. There is a logical flow between these four modes. Productive forces have gradually improved and as they have improved, a shift in the general outline of society has occurred in order to better suit the productive forces. Whether this flow will end in communism or whether class antagonisms underlie all historical struggles is irrelevant. The presence of a flow based on developing productive forces is what matters and what gives historical materialism its validity.

Even though historical materialism has taken its shots, it still remains a solid theory due to its ability to explain the overall flow and outline of the past. The transitions from one mode of production to another are evident. Each mode has built upon the previous and man has slowly drifted toward a better way of creating a livelihood. In this paper, I have provided few specific historical examples to support historical materialism. I believe this is unnecessary and something only used in an attempt to disprove the theory without knowing its original intent. Historical materialism cannot be considered literally. It cannot explain all of history. It can only explain the general outline. If this moves historical materialism into the realm of dogma as some have argued, then so be it. That does not take away the strengths of the theory when considered as a general guideline for studying the past.

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