**Historical Materialism**

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Chapter 1

**Abstract**

Marx’s theory of history is often misrepresented as a mechanically deterministic and fatalistic theory of change in which the complexity of the real world is reduced to simple, unconvincing abstractions. Nothing could be further from the truth. Though Stalin attempted to transform Marxism into something akin to this caricature to justify Russia’s state-capitalist industrialisation after 1928, neither Marx nor his most perceptive followers understood historical materialism in this way. In this essay I show that Marx’s theory of history, once unpicked from its misrepresentations, allows us to comprehend social reality as a non-reductive, synthetic and historical totality. This approach is alive to the complexity of the social world without succumbing to the descriptive eclecticism characteristic of non-Marxist historiography. And by escaping the limits of merely descriptive history, Marxism offers the possibility of a scientific approach to revolutionary practice as the flipside to comprehending the present, as Georg Lukács put it, as a historical problem.

**Keywords**

Historical materialism, dialectics, totality, history, Marx, Engels

**Introduction**

The term historical materialism has a peculiar place within the Marxist tradition. While it has come to function as a synonym for Marxism, the phrase itself was never used by Marx. In fact, it was first coined by Engels after Marx’s death as a synonym for an earlier notion, “the materialist conception of history”, that he had first used in his 1859 review of Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in which Marx famously summarised his method as he developed it in opposition to more or less superficial alternatives in the 1840s (MECW 49, 8; 36).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Engels aimed, both in his 1859 review and in a series of later essays and letters, to unpack Marx’s dense methodological comments to make them palatable to the general reader. Many critics have argued that in so doing Engels reduced Marx’s method to a mechanically determinist and fatalist caricature of the real thing. And just as Marx once famously joked that he was not a Marxist (MECW 46, 356), Engels’s critics have suggested that Marx was not an (Engelsian) historical materialist either (Thomas 2008, 39). Others have gone further to suggest that Marx shared Engels’s mechanically determinist and reductive conception of history. So, despite the illuminating insights contained within his historical writings, the method outlined in the 1859 preface is incompatible with the tenets of modern historiography (Rigby 1998, 94).

As we shall see, neither Marx, nor Engels (Blackledge 2017), embraced a reductive or mechanical method. In fact, Marx’s method, properly understood, facilitates the integration of evidence into a non-reductive, synthetic whole that offers the possibility of simultaneously *explaining* the historical process with a view to informing revolutionary practice. This approach stands in stark contrast to the tendency towards eclectic *description* characteristic of even the best of non-Marxist historiography.

Georg Lukács articulated the most philosophically sophisticated critique of the limitations of non-Marxist thought generally and non-Marxist historiography in particular. He argued that it was impossible to comprehend capitalism as a historical totality from the (bourgeois) standpoint of the individual within civil society because “when the individual confronts objective reality he is faced by a complex of ready-made and unalterable objects which allow him only the subjective responses of recognition or rejection” (Lukács 1971, 48; 50; 63; 69). To argue that this standpoint is bourgeois should not be interpreted mechanically as assuming that those who hold it are individual members of the bourgeoisie. Rather, it is best understood as a claim that this general worldview emerged with the rise of capitalism whose parameters it cannot escape. In relation to historiography, this failing explained the “total inability of every bourgeois thinker and historian to see the world-historical events of the present [1914–23 - PB] as universal history”. More generally, Lukács claimed, “we see the unhistorical and antihistorical character of bourgeois thought most strikingly when we consider *the problem of the present as a historical problem*”. Because the standpoint of the individual within civil society tends to naturalise capitalist social relations, intellectuals viewing the world from this perspective are incapable adequately of conceiving “the present as history” (Lukács 1971, 157-8).

Conversely, the collective struggles of the proletariat against alienation provide a standpoint from which intellectuals can begin to understand capitalism as a historical totality. It is because the proletariat exists at the centre of the constant reproduction of bourgeois society that its struggles against this system are able to point beyond it. Historical materialism, from this perspective, is best understood as “the theory of the proletarian revolution … because its essence is an intellectual synthesis of the social existence which produces and fundamentally determines the proletariat; and because the proletariat struggling for liberation finds its clear self-consciousness in it” (Lukács 1970, 9).

Conceived in this way, it is understandable that the influence of Marxism has tended to ebb and flow with changing fortunes in the class struggle. Within the academy, Marxism became more popular as the generation radicalised in the 1960s came to maturity, while the subsequent downturn in class struggle informed what Ellen Meiksins Wood called a “retreat from class” amongst intellectuals from the late 1970s onwards (Wood 1986). Subsequently, many radical intellectuals tended to justify their embrace of culturally defined New Social Movements at the expense of socially structured class politics through criticisms of Marxism’s supposed inability to comprehend non-economic forms of oppression and domination (Blackledge 2013; Palmer 1990).

In what follows, I challenge this caricature of Marxism. The core of the false claim that Marx’s method is reductive, is a one-dimensional interpretation of his attempt to conceptualise the complexity of the real world as a synthetic whole. As we shall see, although Marx’s *dialectical* approach is not reductive it does fundamentally challenge the dominant tendency merely to describe reality superficially as the evolving interaction of a multiplicity of factors. As Georg Plekhanov argued more than a century ago, the problem with the factoral approach to social analysis lies not in the attempt to distinguish different aspects of the mediated whole, but rather in the tendency to reify these factors such that history is made to stand still. Marxism transcends the theory of factors not by reducing everything to class but through a “synthetic view of social life” that facilitates our cognition of the whole as a complex totality centred on humanity’s productive engagement with nature (Plekhanov 1944, 13). Because this approach allowed Marx to comprehend the social whole as a historically evolving totality it underpinned his organic conception of revolutionary politics (MECW 25, 27).

# The Materialist Conception of History

In 1859 Marx and Engels published outlines of their basic methodology. The first of these essays was Marx’s preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, followed by Engels’s review of this book. Both these works are somewhat opaque: Marx’s preface was written with an eye to the censor (Prinz 1968); while only the first two of three projected instalments of Engels’s review were written because the journal in which it was serialised, *Das Volk* (effectively edited by Marx), went bankrupt before Engels had time to complete the final part of the review (MECW 16, 673-4).

The central paragraph of Marx’s preface is an infamously dense summary of themes from *The German Ideology* (for a comparison of these texts see Carver 1983, 72-77).

“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” (MECW 29, 263).

According to Richard Miller, the widespread claim that this passage proffers a mechanically determinist and fatalist theory of history is predicated upon the assumption that Marx was a positivist. And while it is certainly possible to interpret Marx’s 1859 preface through a positivist lens as making hard technologically deterministic predictions which are not only falsifiable but have in fact been falsified, Miller points out that neither Marx nor “most of his insightful followers” understood historical materialism in this way (Miller 1984, 7, 271ff). In fact, Marx’s method is best understood, contra positivism, as a precursor to the critical realist philosophy of social science. This approach includes a stratified conception of reality through which agency is explained as an emergent property rooted in but irreducible to underlying social relations. Further, this approach points to the existence of *tendencies* rather than superficial Humean constant conjunctions. Interpreted in this way, Marx is best understood as positing that though modes of production shape the contours of social struggles, *definite* historically and socially constituted men and women are the active, conscious and (historically relative) free agents of change. In this model there is nothing pre-ordained about the outcome of the struggles in which these agents engage (Blackledge 2006, 14-16; Meikle 1985, 57; Collier 1994). This is why, as Geoffrey de Ste. Croix has powerfully argued and as many Marxist historians have demonstrated in practice, there is no necessary contradiction between Marx’s conception of social structure on the one hand and the demand that historians attempt to richly reconstruct historical processes on the other (Ste. Croix 1983, 90).

More concretely, Marx’s analytical distinction between forces and relations of production on the one hand, and base and superstructure on the other is intended not as a schema of automatic historical progress but rather as a map of the broad coordinates of revolutionary politics. If the development of the forces of production – the means of production and the labour power required to utilise instruments and raw materials – sets the parameters of what is politically possible at any particular historical juncture, the relations of production – class relations of effective control – frame the contradictory material interests that underpin the evolving lines of conflict in developing struggles. This latter concept is the foundation of the *Communist Manifesto’s* claim that “[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another” (MECW 6, 482).

If crises born of the contradiction between forces and relations of production evidence the historical necessity of revolution, the potential for hope emerges because structural crises create the conditions in which revolutionary movements *tend* to develop as groups rooted in the relations of production coalesce around competing responses to structural crises. But victory for these revolutionary forces is never guaranteed: though structural crises will tend to generate challenges to the existing relations of production, the legal, political and ideological superstructure acts to ensure the reproduction of these relations. Which side will triumph in the ensuing conflicts is an open question. As Marx and Engels wrote in the *Manifesto*: the class struggle is “carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (MECW 6, 482; Harman 1998, 7-54).

Engels’s own gloss on Marx’s method points in a similar direction. In his introduction to the English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* he defined historical materialism as “that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another” (MECW 27, 289). He was, however, adamant that this was not a reductionist model:

“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” (MECW 49, 34-5).

Engels emphasised, for instance, that this approach allowed “political power” to enjoy a degree of “relative independence” from the economic base (MECW 49, 60). Moreover, he insisted that the sophistication of his and Marx’s method was apparent in their works of historical analysis. While in polemics with their opponents they often one-sidedly “emphasise[d] the main principle … when it came to presenting a section of history … it was a different matter and there no error was permissible” (MECW 49, 36).

The charge that Engels mischaracterised Marx’s method in his 1859 review (Carver 1983, 116) is difficult to square with what we know of piece’s publication history. Marx was editing the journal in which Engels’s essay was published, he had asked Engels for the review, and Engels had offered it with a cover note suggesting that “if you don’t like it *in toto*, tear it up and let me have your opinion” (MECW 40, 478). Moreover, while the phrase “materialist conception of history” may have been new in 1859, it certainly is not an eccentric description of either Marx’s 1859 preface, the approach outlined in *The German Ideology*, or (though Engels hadn’t had sight of this) Marx’s method as detailed in the 1857 *Introduction* (Hunley 1991, 92).

This is not to say that nothing new was added to the Marxist method in the late 1850s. There was a shift in Marx’s understanding of method at this juncture, but this development constituted, as Henri Lefebvre has argued, a deepening of Marx’s conception of the historical method (Lefebvre 2009, 69-74). To this end, he famously wrote to Engels in January 1858 stating: “What was of great use to me as regards method of treatment was Hegel’s *Logic*” (MECW 40, 249). Though Marx’s re-engagement with Hegel is of the first importance to his method, before I discuss this aspect of his work it is instructive to outline the theory of history he articulated alongside Engels in *The German Ideology*.

*The German Ideology* is not an easy read. The text that eventually saw the light of day after its authors deaths was cobbled together from various unfinished texts penned between November 1845 and August 1846 and intended for publication as separate journal articles (Carver and Blank 2014). Though this provenance gives *The German Ideology* a somewhat opaque quality, it nonetheless remains an invaluable resource for anyone wanting to understand and extend Marx and Engels’s method of analysis. For it was through these manuscripts that they achieved a degree of what they both described as “self-clarification” (MECW 29, 264; MECW 26, 519), while the manuscript itselfoffers “page after page [of] astonishing insights” (Arthur 2015)

In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels argue that humans make and remake themselves through labour to meet their needs. It is through social, conscious productive interaction with nature that our ancestors became human: they transformed themselves by working together to transform nature. So, while Marx and Engels argue that we do have a nature made up of needs and capacities, by contrast with crude materialists who posit this essence as a simple transhistorical fact, they insist that our nature is not fixed because these needs and capacities are not fixed; our essence evolves because these needs and capacities develop through our active interaction with nature (MECW 5, 41-3). This argument marks the point of synthesis between the concepts of practice and material need which constitutes a core feature of Marxism. Moreover, because need is a social concept that nonetheless has natural roots, this argument highlights the unity (but not identity) of natural and social history (MECW 5, 28-9).

This unity between natural and social history informs their famous claim that definite individuals at a specific moment in time differentiated themselves from nature by consciously transforming their environment in order to meet their (initially natural) needs:

“Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life” (MECW 5, 31).

Consequently, rather than follow modern political theory from Hobbes and Locke onwards in positing abstract “man” as the starting point for the analysis of the social world, Marx and Engels wrote that their study proceeds from the standpoint of definite individuals in definite social relations:

“The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity” (MECW 5, 31).

The human essence is on their account an historical rather than ideal abstraction: at any particular juncture it is the “sum of productive forces, capital funds and social forms of intercourse” (MECW5, 54). Though too often dismissed as the background noise to history, the mere “reproduction of the physical existence *of* the individuals”, human productive interaction with nature is rather “a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part” (MECW 5, 31). More specifically, by contrast with traditional elitist ideologies that tend to denigrate practice as the poor cousin to theory’s pure universality, Marx and Engels’s insist that our consciousness is profoundly shaped by the way we produce to meet our needs.

“Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness. For the first manner of approach the starting-point is consciousness taken as the living individual; for the second manner of approach, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as *their* consciousness” (MECW 5, 36-7; cf MECW29, 263).

Marx and Engels argue that production includes both natural and social aspects. It comprises not only our work on nature to meet our needs but also the social relations that spring from working together to that end. Indeed, “a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage” (MECW5, 43). They labelled the totality of these relations a “mode of production”, and periodised history according to changes in the mode of production (MECW 5, 43). Their conception of a mode of production as a totality is in the first instance a “scientific hypothesis” about how the world works (Vygodski 1973, 16). The essence of capitalism is different from the essence of feudalism and both of these differ again from other modes of production. The goal of science is, in the first instance, to grasp the essence of each particular mode so as to understand its distinct dynamic. It can only then move on to make sense of more complex characteristics of the system as a whole.

It was through the concept of mode of production that Marx and Engels began to overcome the limitations of earlier attempts to understand modernity (MECW 5, 32-37). By contrast both with liberalism’s attempt to naturalise egoistic individualism and private property and earlier socialist criticisms of the consequences of private property, they outlined a dialectical and historical approach according to which private property had a history – having evolved through “tribal”, “ancient communal”, “feudal” and onto its present capitalist form – and through its history these specific forms had played positive and negative parts at specific junctures. Most recently, capitalist private property had fostered the social development necessary for the transition to socialism before itself becoming a fetter on further development (MECW 5, 33; 48).

While this approach marked a step beyond both liberal and early socialist conceptions of private property, when compared with Marx’s later conception of social determination, it remains analytically weak. For whereas Marx would subsequently insist that production determines exchange and distribution, in this earlier text he and Engels conceive production and exchange as co-determining distribution which in turn determines them (MECW 5, 40). Nonetheless, the analysis of private property in *The German Ideology* did constitute a profound theoretical breakthrough. It allowed Marx and Engels to grasp capitalism as a historical mode of production with dominant progressive and regressive characteristics at different moments in its history. Furthermore, they understood this dialectical account of capitalism to be a specific example of a more general historical law whereby social change through revolutions occurs when social relations that had previously fostered social development subsequently come to fetter that development (MECW 5, 74; cf MECW 29, 263). Marx subsequently worked an important improvement on the account of social change given in *The German Ideology*. Whereas in *The German Ideology* he used the term “forms of intercourse” to describe the social relations that initially fostered and latterly fettered the development of the forces of production and through which he periodised history, he subsequently refined this concept as relations of production to rid it of any remnants of technological determinism (Therborn 1976, 366; Callinicos 2004, 48).

More specifically, Marx and Engels argued that though private property had previously played a progressive historical role, the crises and social conflicts that it now engendered meant that this was no longer the case. This claim was a double-edged sword: although socialism was now moving onto the historical and political agenda, this movement was possible only because economic growth had previously been fostered by private property relations. Consequently, any attempt to bypass this earlier stage of history would be disastrous for the socialist project: the

“development of productive forces ... is an absolutely necessary practical premise, because without it privation, *want* is merely made general, and with *want* the struggle for necessities would begin again, and all the old filthy business would necessarily be restored” (MECW 5, 49).

Concretely, it is “only with large-scale industry [that] the abolition of private property becomes possible” (MECW 5, 64). As a fundamental precept of Marx’s theory of history this argument also undermines the claims that Stalin and Mao were able to introduce socialism in relatively backward countries (Cliff 1974).

 Socialism, in Marx and Engels’s model, far from being an abstract, transhistorical moral ideal is best understood as a historically concrete form offered as a solution by definite historically constituted individuals to historically specific problems (Blackledge 2012). Ludwig Feuerbach, the most important antagonist in their critique could understand none of this because he assumed two related myths; a transhistorical human essence alongside a transhistorical natural world (MECW 5, 40-1). This mistake meant that insofar as he “is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist. With him materialism and history diverge completely” (MECW 5, 41).

Marx and Engels’s new approach to human history amounted to a real transcendence (sublation) of materialism and idealism. As Lukács argued, they aimed to overcome the opposition between materialism and idealism by synthesising causal, materialist models of behaviour with purposeful, idealist accounts of agency to provide a framework through which our actions could be understood as *human* actions (Lukács 1975, 345). Marx famously contrasted his approach with these earlier systems in the first of his *Theses on Feuerbach*:

“The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such” (MECW 5, 4).

So, Marx differentiated his materialism from older forms of materialism which were in one way or another reductive in their effects. His sublation of materialism and idealism into a new approach to history nonetheless remained a form of materialism because it recognised that priority should be assigned to satisfying our needs: as Chris Arthur writes, “*in the first instance* material circumstances condition us, however much we revolutionise those conditions later” (Arthur 1970, 23).

By contrast with the fatalism of earlier mechanical forms of materialism, because Marx and Engels aimed to grasp real historical change, theirs was a form of “practical materialism” focused on “revolutionising the existing world, of practically coming to grips with and changing the things found in existence” (MECW 5, 38). Indeed, they claimed that in the modern world practical materialism was a synonym for communism because only those intent on the revolutionary reconstruction of existing social relations are able to transcend the sterile opposition between the old mechanical materialism, which accepted reality as a pre-given and immutable fact, and its idealist (moralist) other which responded to the evils of the world with “impotence in action” (MECW4, 201). Conversely, practical materialism assumes the existence of agents already challenging the status quo: “The existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular period presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class” (MECW 5, 60). In the modern world, or so Marx and Engels claimed, this was the working class, and they framed their political activity in relation to its real struggles against capitalism.

**Coquetting with Hegel**

What Marx added to this model when he reread Hegel in the 1850s was a more nuanced understanding of how the social world might be conceived as a totality of interdependent processes. In his 1857 *Introduction* he wrote:

“The economists of the seventeenth century, e.g., always begin with the living whole, with population, nation, state, several states, etc.; but they always conclude by discovering through analysis a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc. As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method. The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception. Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought. In this way Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself, whereas the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind” (Marx 1973, 101; MECW 28, 37-8).

Though the approach set out here is clearly dialectical, it is also not Hegelian. Marx suggested that he “openly avowed [himself] the pupil of that mighty thinker, and even … coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to him” (Marx 1976, 103). However, whereas the Hegelian concept develops deductively, for Marx conceptual deepening emerged through the successive introduction of more complex determinations as he sought to move from the abstract to the concrete (Ilyenkov 2013, 149-167). Commenting on this method, Bertell Ollman writes that Marx and Engels considered the whole to be constituted through its internal relations, and their work focused on the painstaking reconstitution of the whole as such a concrete totality (Ollman 1976, 34; Marx 1973, 101). As Engels wrote:

“Our view of history, however, is first and foremost a guide to study, not a tool for constructing objects after the Hegelian model. The whole of history must be studied anew, and the existential conditions of the various social formations individually investigated before an attempt is made to deduce therefrom the political, legal, aesthetic, philosophical, religious, etc., standpoints that correspond to them” (MECW 49, 8).

So, while Marx and Engels may well have agreed with Hegel that the truth is the whole, they nonetheless insisted that the process of reproducing the whole in thought as a concrete totality of many determinations was an arduous and on-going scientific process. Marx’s goal was not to reduce non-economic processes of oppression and domination to class relations. Rather, he aimed to integrate these processes into a complex totality where explanation “means something like being placed correctly in the system of concepts that together form the theory of the capitalist mode of production” (Callinicos 2014, 131; cf Gimenez 2001). According to Sue Clegg this method entails, for instance, not that forms of oppression are reduced to epiphenomena of class relations but that they are conceived as part of a greater whole: **“**The argument for historical materialism is not, as some of its critics have claimed, to reduce women’s oppression to class but that women’s position only makes sense in the explanatory context of the dynamics of particular modes of production” (Clegg 1997, 210).

Clegg is right, for though Marx insisted that relations of production constitute the inner essence of a mode of production, he also stressed that other aspects of the social whole cannot be reduced to these underlying social relations but must be understood through an active engagement with empirical evidence.

The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community which grows up out of the production relations themselves, thereby simultaneously its specific political form. It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers – a relation always naturally corresponding to a definite stage in the development of the methods of labour and thereby its social productivity – which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state. This does not prevent the same economic basis – the same from the standpoint of its main conditions – due to innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural environment, racial relations, external historical influences, etc., from showing infinite variations and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given conditions (Marx 1981, 927).

Consequently, in his theory of history Marx posited a method of analysis that opens with an attempt to grasp the essence of a system understood as the dominant form in which surplus is extracted from the direct producers. However, essence is not appearance, and science must also be able to comprehend totalities as complex wholes not as simple abstractions, and this entails careful theoretically informed and detailed engagement with evidence.

In modern capitalist societies Marx’s method involves starting from an analysis of wage labour, because this is the historically novel and dominant form through which surplus is extracted from the direct producers. Wage labour is not, of course, the only way that surplus is thus extracted, and it certainly is not the only form of work in the modern world. Nevertheless, it is the dominant form through which the system is reproduced and the specific character of wage labour differentiates capitalism from earlier modes of production. In particular, wage labour underpins capitalism’s most salient characteristics: its dynamism and its tendency to crisis.

By contrast with this essentialist model, descriptive accounts of history tend to reduce it to the successive iteration of mere chance – one damn thing after another as Toynbee wrote. This latter approach is weaker than Marxism because it fails to recognise that to understand a thing we must grasp not merely what it is but also what it has the potential to become and indeed what its essence necessitates that it tends towards (Meikle 1983; 1985). For Marx, properly understood the scientific method aims to reveal the dynamic social essence beneath the appearance of things: “all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence” (Marx 1981, 956). To this end, social science is a theoretical exercise aimed at cognising the world we inhabit: “in the analysis of economic forms neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of assistance. The power of abstraction must replace both” (Marx 1976, 90). Marx’s own contribution to this project revealed that capitalist society necessarily tends both to dynamism and crisis, which in turn impose an ageing process on the system - and these are all essential characteristics of capitalism. Of course, the ways in which these tendencies are realised in practice is highly mediated and complex. If this truth means that mechanical applications of Marx’s model to reality will tend to a crude caricature of existing reality, the alternative approach of dismissing essence as a metaphysical concept lends itself to the tendency to lose sight of the capitalist wood for the trees.

Critics of essentialism generally argue that it fails as a model of history because it is fundamentally reductive. But as Scott Meikle argues in relation to Geoffrey de Ste. Croix’s *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* this criticism of Marxism misses its mark. In his magnificent book, Ste. Croix aimed to reveal the essence of the ancient world as a system of surplus extraction from unfree labour. Far from being a reductive exercise, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* married the highest level of theoretical sophistication with an incredibly detailed knowledge both of the primary and the secondary sources for his period of study. By marrying these two aspects of knowledge, Ste. Croix was able to *explain* the historical evolution of the ancient Greek world in relation to slowly changing forms of unfree labour whereas even the best of mainstream historians were only able to describe this process (Ste Croix 1983; Meikle 1983; Blackledge 2006).

Ste. Croix illuminated the changing form of surplus extraction over more than a millennium, and through his analysis he revealed the evolution from the ancient mode of production dominated by slavery to the feudal system dominated by serfdom. This changing essence underpinned changes across society more broadly, as new social relations gave rise to new forms of rationality, politics and culture. In so doing, Ste. Croix’s book acts as a concrete application of Marx’s method. He shows how the “real individuals” noted as the starting point of analysis by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* are in fact, as Marx wrote in the 1857 *Introduction*, concrete not because they are the unmediated starting point of analysis imagined by naive positivists, but because they are constituted through the synthetic “concentration of many determinations”. They are, therefore “a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception” (Marx 1973, 101).

**England’s Bourgeois Revolution?**

The limitations of descriptive history are evident in mainstream interpretations of the English Civil War that tend to frame it as a struggle between two sections of the English ruling class which had little or nothing to do with the rise of capitalism. Marxists, by contrast, have tended to label the events of 1640-1660 as a bourgeois revolution, though they disagree markedly over the meaning and even applicability of this term.

In his fundamental contribution to this literature, Brian Manning evidenced the power of Marx’s essentialist method as compared to the superficiality of mainstream historiography. He agreed that the mainstream account of the Civil War captured a superficial truth, but insisted that this account was inadequate as an explanation for the Revolution. In a series of studies of turning points in the Revolution he highlighted the decisive part played within it by the “intervention of people from outside the class that normally dominated politics” (Manning 1992, 16-17).

In his discussion of the growing divisions with the ruling class in the period 1640-42, Manning looked beneath the superficial story of the growing distrust felt for Charles by large sections of the aristocracy to examine the role of popular struggles in shaping the opposing sections of the ruling class. He explained the emergence of a strong royalist party in this period as a response to the fear caused by the independent actions of the London crowd. Conversely, he points out that parliamentarians came to believe that the only force that stood between them and the King’s wrath was the London crowd (Manning 1991, 71; 101).

 According to Manning, the independence of the core group of the crowd was rooted in the growing economic independence of the “middle sort of people” in the century preceding the conflict (Manning 1991, 230). This analysis of the role of the middling sort in the revolution followed Maurice Dobb’s argument that English capitalism emerged from within the ranks of the direct producers, and that roughly speaking the nation divided in the 1640s along socio-economic lines (Dobb 1963, 170; Manning 1994, 86). Manning suggested that the growing importance of this group should be related to the prior development of industry, and through his stress on this development Dobb was able to explain why “industrial districts ‑ not all of them ‑ provided a main base for the parliamentarian and revolutionary parties” (Manning, 1994, 84-86). Following Dobb, Manning argued that the English Revolution could best be understood as a bourgeois revolution located within a framework dominated by “the rise of capitalism” (Manning 1999, 45-51).

This concept of an English bourgeois revolution is contentious even amongst Marxists. Perhaps the most important critic of this sort of interpretation of the Civil War is Robert Brenner. Though Brenner has written a detailed analysis of the social roots of the conflict between the English monarchy and parliament in the 1640s (Brenner 1993), he rejects the idea of a bourgeois revolution because, he argues, the break between feudalism and capitalism long preceded the Civil War. In his alternate account of this transition he argues that capitalism originated not as a result of a victory of the peasantry over the feudal nobility in the class struggle, and still less the product of a rising bourgeoisie, but as an unintended consequence of the class struggle under feudalism. According to Brenner:

 “‘the breakthrough from ‘traditional economy’ to relative self-sustaining economic development was predicated upon the emergence of a specific set of class or social-property relations in the countryside - that is, capitalist class relations. This outcome depended, in turn, upon the previous success of a two-sided process of class development and class conflict: on the one hand, the destruction of serfdom; on the other, the short-circuiting of the emerging predominance of small peasant property” (Brenner, 1985, 30).

In France serfdom was destroyed by the class struggle between peasants and lords, but the process went beyond that needed for the development of capitalism, leading instead to the establishment of widespread small peasant property. In Eastern Europe the peasants were defeated, leading to the reintroduction of serfdom. Only in England did conditions evolve that were optimal for the evolution of agrarian capitalism. Guy Bois has argued that Brenner’s thesis “amounts to a voluntarist vision of history in which the class struggle is divorced from all other objective contingencies and, in the first place, from such laws of development as may be peculiar to a specific mode of production” (Bois 1985, 115). Conversely, Ellen Meiksins Wood argues that Brenner’s interpretation of the transition to capitalism in England is of the first importance because, contra the orthodox Marxist case that ascribes explanatory primacy in history to the development of the productive forces, Brenner does not assume that a peculiar rationality, characteristic only of the capitalist mode of production, is a constituent element of human nature. His approach is better able than its alternatives to grasp the specificity of capitalist rationality, and consequently the possibility of transcending capitalism (Wood, 1999, 7).

Though nominally aimed at Marx’s 1859 preface, Wood’s critique of orthodoxy is best understood as a challenge to GA Cohen’s understanding of historical materialism as detailed in his classic study *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* (1978). Cohen’s interpretation of Marxism is characterised by its analytically rigorous defence of two key propositions. First, “the forces of production tend to develop throughout history (the development thesis),” and, second, “the nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces (the primacy thesis)” (Cohen 2000, 134). Cohen explained the relationship between these propositions, and thus the course of history, in functionalist terms (Cohen 2000, 260; 272). He also pointed to an explanation for the salience of the development thesis: he assumed that in a situation of scarcity human agents find it rational to develop the forces of production over time. This is because “men are . . . somewhat rational”, they live in a “historical situation of ... scarcity”, and they “possess intelligence of a kind and degree which enables them to improve their situation” (Cohen 2000, 152). Cohen’s interpretation of historical materialism consequently included an idiosyncratic defence of a type of political fatalism that was rooted in what Erik Olin Wright et al. call a “transhistorical” model of human rationality (Wright et al 1992, 24). He claimed that “in so far as the course of history, and more particularly, the future socialist revolution are, for Marx, inevitable, they are inevitable not despite what men may do, but because of what men, being rational, as bound, predictably, to do” (Cohen 2000, 147; 1988, 55). Commenting on this argument, Alex Callinicos observes that the inevitabilist structure of Cohen’s reinterpretation of historical materialism “is almost a *reductio*” of historical materialism, while Terry Eagleton writes that “[r]arely has a wrongheaded idea been so magnificently championed” (Callinicos 2004, 69; Eagleton 2011, 242-243).

If some theorists have responded to Cohen’s work by dismissing the utility of the developmental thesis and productive force determinism, others have attempted to salvage the rational core of these ideas. The problem with Cohen’s account is that by interpreting Marx as a positivist he reconstructed a caricatured version of historical materialism as a fatalist theory of change. By contrast, when he was still a Marxist Alasdair MacIntyre argued that if the ethical core of Marxist political theory was to be retrieved from the corpse of Stalinism, historical materialism must be rescued from such crude account of historical progress (MacIntyre 2008a, 32). Stalin’s claim that history’s general course was predictable rested, or so MacIntyre maintained, on a misconception of the role of the base–superstructure metaphor in Marxist theory. Marx understood this metaphor as denoting neither a mechanical nor a causal relationship. Rather, he utilised Hegelian language to denote the process through which the economic base of a society provides “a framework within which superstructures arise, a set of relations around which the human relations can entwine themselves, a kernel of human relationships from which all else grows”. It was a mistake to imply that according to this model political developments followed automatically from economic causes. This is because in Marx’s view “the crucial character of the transition to socialism is not that it is a change in the economic base but that it is a revolutionary change in the relation of base to superstructure” (MacIntyre 2008a, 39).

Through this argument MacIntyre began the process of reconnecting Marx’s conception of history to his revolutionary politics after they had been torn asunder by the Stalinist counter-revolution. MacIntyre showed that once extricated from positivistic caricatures of his writings, Marx’s theory of history could be conceived as an essential resource for anyone wanting to understand, so as to overcome, capitalism as a historically transient mode of production. More concretely, as we have noted Manning’s work on the English Revolution detailed how the development of the forces of production in the century prior to 1640 had cumulatively restructured society such that new forms of agency emerged that were able to challenge the status quo in a way that would have been inconceivable a century earlier (cf Harman 1998, 96).

If it is difficult to imagine Cromwell’s victory, the Restoration and subsequently the Glorious Revolution apart from these changes, it is equally true that the precise outcome of these revolutionary struggles was not pre-ordained. As Chris Harman points out, nothing was inevitable about the triumph of capitalism. The area around Prague was the most economically developed part of Europe in the early seventeenth century, but social forces similar to those that won a revolution in England were defeated by feudal reaction in Bohemia (Harman 1998, 103-5). If Brenner agrees with Harman that the outcome of the class struggle could not be predicted, they differ markedly in their assessment of the role of the development of the forces of production in history. Following Bois and others, Harman argues that a focus on the development of the forces of production allows historians to better explain why the revolutionary challenge to feudalism happened generally across Europe when it did, and not at any earlier point over the previous millennium (Harman & Brenner 2006).

Whether one finds Harman or Brenner more persuasive on this point, their approaches share a desire to comprehend the transition from feudalism to capitalism in terms of forces inherent to the feudal system and without recourse to claims of inevitability. Gramsci embraced a similar conception of Marxism. Against attempts to downplay the role of individuals in the Marxist theory of history Gramsci insisted that “organic crises” could develop and continue indefinitely if the agency required to overcome them did not appear.

‘A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity), and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them. These … efforts … form the terrain of the conjunctural (Gramsci 1971, 178).

Similarly, though from the opposite angle, Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* examined Lenin’s role in overcoming an organic crisis. Trotsky maintained that individual socialists could play pivotal roles in history. But whereas in the past the process of revolutionary change had been less consciously determined, the transition from capitalism to socialism could only won if the agents had a clear understanding by the of their position within a historical process. Because Lenin not only had a profound understanding of the historical process but also had built a party able to act on this understanding he was able to enter a “chain of objective historic forces” in October 1917. Specifically, Lenin accelerated the process through which the Bolsheviks were able to grasp the new reality at a moment when time was at a premium, such that without him the revolutionary opportunity would probably have been missed (Trotsky 1977, 343). Commenting on these arguments, MacIntyre points out that, by contrast with caricatured criticisms of Marxism, because Trotsky recognised that “from time to time history presents us with real alternatives”, his *History* illuminated the dialectical unity that can exist between great social forces and individual political initiatives (MacIntyre 2008b, 275).

**Conclusion**

Commenting on Trotsky’s *History*, CLR James wrote that “it is the greatest history book ever written … the climax of two thousand years of European writing and study of history” (James 1994, 118). James was no fool, and he did not give praise lightly. He believed that Trotsky deserved this accolade because his *History* creatively applied Marx’s synthesis of the great strands of European culture to reconstruct the historical totality without either reducing the role of individuals to epiphenomena of broader social forces or reifying them as “great men” separate from these forces. Trotsky’s *History* was therefore a powerful example, perhaps the most powerful example, of what Hobsbawm calls “total history”, understood not as a “history of everything but history as an indivisible web in which all human activities are interconnected” (Hobsbawm 2007, 186).

To reconstruct the social totality in the mind was, of course, Marx’s aim, and it continues to be the aim of contemporary Marxists. This project is an intrinsic aspect of revolutionary politics because the social revolution demands the present be understood as a historically constituted whole. Such a scientific account of the present as a historically evolving whole is an essential prerequisite for coherent revolutionary practice. If radical theory too often shares with mainstream social science a tendency to mere description – one thinks of intersectionality theory for instance - pseudo-radical criticisms of the ideas of essentialism, necessity and totality actually undermine the attempt to move beyond abstract moral condemnation to the politics of liberation. In this essay I’ve argued, contra the caricatures of Marx’s theory of history as a mechanically deterministic and fatalist conception of reality, that, by providing the resources necessary to understand the present as a historical problem, historical materialism is the necessary theoretical complement to socialist activity without which the latter is blind.

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1. Quotations from Marx and Engels are taken from the *Marx and Engels Collected Works (MECW),* fifty volumes 1975-2004, Moscow: Progress Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)