
Historical Materialism: A fetter on productive politics

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1 Part 1: The orthodox idea of historical materialism

Historical materialism (HM) is a theory of history and historical change. It has been a central idea for most Marxists since the 1890s. Its flaws have led to a number of mistakes in both theory and practice. It's therefore something worth investigating and evaluating.

One difficulty in talking about historical materialism is that the term is used in a number of different ways. For some people it is a deterministic theory that explains how societies transition on an inevitable path towards communism, while for others, they simply mean a 'materialist conception of history' (i.e. there was more going on than rulers making decisions). This article will outline the orthodox core of HM. It reflects a widespread understanding among both Marxists and non-Marxists, which may be more or less nuanced, but share the same basic theoretical structure.

1.1 Origins

Marx did not write the equivalent of *Capital* for history. He did not even use the term 'historical materialism'. After his death people sought to divine and define a Marxist system that would explain pretty much everything, and one result of this was historical materialism. Along with its philosophical cousin dialectical materialism, it was taken up by Marxist-Leninists as part of their worldview, but it has been a pervasive idea among socialists before and since the era of official communist parties¹

The most famous passage from Marx that people turn to, and the one generally placed at the core of HM, is from the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), a kind of first go at writing what became *Capital* (all emphases are ours):

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, **relations of production** which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material **productive forces**. 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 conditions 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 of 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 hitherto. **From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters.**

¹ See for example, Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (1938).

Then begins an epoch of social revolution. **With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.**

This gives us the key concepts that make up the core of HM, and that we will examine in more detail, through their use by historical materialists:

- Forces of production
- Relations of production
- Economic foundation - usually referred to as the base
- Superstructure

1.2 Forces and relations of production

Forces of production are the technical aspects of production - those things that directly enable the production process and/or increase productivity:

“This includes the”means of production” (sometimes called “productive capital”) – land, tools, machines, computers, factories, and offices, usually expanded to include distribution and exchange – transport, shops and infrastructure.^a The forces of production include human labour power. And they include the knowledge, skills and technologies that underpin its application.”^b

^a This is wrong, on two counts. Capital is only a meaningful category within capitalism. “Productive capital” is - for Marx at least - not the means of production but the form capital takes in the sphere of production, i.e. means of production *and* labour power when active. See Capital volume 2.

^b *What are the ‘forces’, ‘relations’ and ‘modes’ of production?* Marx Memorial Library

Relations of production are the social relations under which production takes place, “the relations of effective ownership and control over the production process”.² In the above quote, Marx refers to this as ‘property relations’. This might be slave/slave owner as a primary production relationship in ancient Greece, serf and lord in classic feudalism, etc.

1.3 Fetters on the productive forces

The forces and relations of production are said to be in tension. For a time, under a specific mode of production, they complement each other, but division arises because the productive forces are subject to continuous development. There are better machines, scientific processes such as artificial fertiliser, new techniques such as crop rotation and so on. Even raw materials are subject to this -- foreign trade, conquest and colonialism makes new stuff available (or enough of what was formerly

² Rob Hoveman, “Marx and historical materialism”, 2018. <https://www.rs21.org.uk/2018/01/21/Marx-and-historical-materialism/>

rare to make better use of it), and oil was some weird sticky stuff that bubbled out of the ground until its utility as an energy source could be realised.

Eventually, the relations of production become a ‘fetter’ on this development, and this tension leads to a rupture, and a new mode of production emerges. New relations of production arise alongside the developed productive forces (below we will see why the claim is that this also restructures wider society).

The Socialist Party of England and Wales offers a typical account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism:

Like with the era of slavery before it, the mode of production under feudalism eventually became a fetter on further progress. In England the feudal system had begun to reach the limits of its development over 200 years before the English civil wars of 1642-1651, which replaced the feudal ruling class with a capitalist ruling class.

Improvements in agricultural methods and the clearing of forests and other areas to provide more land for cultivation had enormously increased agricultural productivity, but could go little further under the feudal system of small peasant plots exploited by feudal lords.^a

^a Socialism Today, “The Marxist view of history”, 2022. <https://socialismtoday.org/the-marxist-view-of-history>

Many HM advocates would say this tension between the forces and relations intensifies class struggle, which needs to be successful to bring about the change that will place forces and relations in harmony with each other again. For some however, this underlying process would just be inevitable. The elastic binding the forces and relations of production together gets stretched and stretched until -- at some point -- it must snap.

The fullest expression of this technological determinism (e.g. Cohen³) takes Marx’s line from *The Poverty of Philosophy* seriously: “the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist”.

This line of thinking led to perhaps the most notorious offspring of HM, often put forward by Marxist-Leninists but dating back to the second International: that there are inevitable stages of history, a chain of modes of production that will lead to communism. Seeking scriptural backing for this position they referred again to the *Contribution* preface, where Marx says “In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society.”

Few historical materialists would be quite so teleological nowadays, but the belief that modes of production rise to suit productive forces and then decline when they cannot keep up with them persists. The plainest outline of this is decadence theory, which describes modes of production as having an

³ Probably the best known book on HM is *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* by GA Cohen, published in 1978.

ascendant/progressive phase, developing the forces of production, and a decadent/declining phase, where it instead stands in their way.⁴

1.4 Base and superstructure

This is HM's key metaphor. How production is organised in a society forms its economic '**base**' - "the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure". The base is usually understood as being made up of the forces and relations of production.⁵

This base determines the '**superstructure**' of society - the sociopolitical realm as separate to and determined by the economic realm. The superstructure is generally understood to encompass the state, politics, religion, ideology, law, education, science, the family -- the social structures that fall outside the economy.

For some historical materialists it's mainly a one way street -- base leads to superstructure. More commonly they will say that each conditions the other, with the base ultimately being the dominant factor. This is often expressed as the base shaping the superstructure, and the superstructure maintaining the base. For example:

- Science and education can be driven by economic need, but can also change production through inventions, a more skilled workforce and so on.
- Laws can be passed that restrict child labour, the length of the working day, safety practices, pollution etc., or religion and custom may affect what days serfs work, or who can work in craft trades. In neither case is the economic basis of capitalism or feudalism fundamentally changed, but it is affected.

When there is a change in the base, this filters through to the superstructure. For example, for a nascent capitalist economy, "The old feudal restrictions were now unbearable impositions, intolerable barriers to progress"⁶ leading to the rise of the modern democratic state. This can be through class struggle playing out in the superstructure as well as the base -- e.g. in this case through bourgeois revolutions. It can also be institutions such as the family, or education changing due to economic demands. For example, the slow erosion of extended family ties into nuclear families under capitalism.

⁴ Decadence theory is mostly associated with left communists - see for example the ICC's pamphlet *The Decadence of Capitalism*.

⁵ For example, an article on *Base and Superstructure* in Socialist Worker: "The base has two parts – the forces of production and the relations of production".

⁶ *An introduction to historical materialism -- part four*, Socialist Appeal

2 Part 2: Critique of the orthodox concepts

2.1 Why should forces of production have a determining role?

Tools, machines, techniques etc are *means* to produce stuff. They are things that increase productivity or enable new stuff to be made. Why should this, in itself, determine the historical course of the people that use them? It is a person who makes use of a tool, or machine, or technique. A wrench cannot dictate to her to what ends she uses it, nor the social relations under which she does so. It is the social conditions in which they exist that push the application of the forces of production in certain directions.

There are new possibilities that arise from new technology -- but these are *possibilities*. Automation could be used to reduce drudgery or dangerous work, and help produce for need. The potential is there. But at the same time, it can be used to cut jobs, creating poverty at the same time as producing more stuff.⁷ What matters is how people act on these possibilities, and the social conditions they find themselves under.

2.2 Development of the productive forces

“The forces of production have an underlying dynamic of change, which is the drive to reduce the amount of labour necessary to produce what is needed and wanted.”^a

^a “Marx and historical materialism” by Rob Hoveman, 2018 available at <https://www.rs21.org.uk/2018/01/21/Marx-and-historical-materialism/>

The development of knowledge over history is generally cumulative (there’s a body of knowledge that gets added to with every new discovery, invention, or experiment), but that does not mean that there is a necessity that it serves production. It is not clear for example that the Greco-Roman way of organising the economy and society was replaced by something more productive.

In popular imagination, the industrial revolution -- mechanised production -- was also the birth of capitalism, but capitalist social relations (e.g. waged labour, production for and determined by the market) were in place well before that, in agriculture, in cottage industries, and then manufacturing (factories existing before industrial production).⁸

In Capital volume 1, Marx describes how capital took the conditions of production it found (handicrafts and a growing number of people free from the means to sustain themselves and free to sell their ability to work) and transformed them -- changing the organisation of labour and ultimately

⁷ See “What is wrong with free money?” available at <https://antinational.org/en/what-wrong-free-money/>

⁸ See for example Meiksins Wood, E, *The Origin of Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2002

subordinating workers to machinery. It shaped the productive forces to meet its needs, rather than being produced by the forces of production.

The idea of a push for development of productive forces applies to capitalism – there is a clear mechanism pushing to increase productivity⁹ -- but that does not make it a universal law of history. Where was the drive, the ‘underlying dynamic of change’ under feudalism?

In any case, the mechanism behind this in capitalism is not internal to the forces of production, it is imposed on them, abstractly because of the logic of M-C-M’¹⁰, concretely from within the relations of production. Each capitalist seeks to increase productivity in pursuit of maximum profit, an inherent aim that they further impose on other capitalists through their competition with each other. If you invent a machine to produce 20 widgets a day when your competitors can only manage 10, you can potentially make twice as much money. In reality, you would use this advantage to undercut them and still make a packet. This happy circumstance lasts until they adopt similar technology, and compete the price down until a day’s production sells for the old amount, divided across more commodities.

This process under capitalism, where the development of new technology drives how things are produced, gives the appearance of an invention determining its use, of technology as the motor force for change. The mistake of the historical materialists is to ignore the specific historical conditions of capitalism -- the technology is developed within a system that demands a continual increase in productivity in service of profit. They take this appearance, misinterpret it, and generalise it into a theory tasked with explaining historical change in general.

Under capitalism, the organisation of production, and the techniques and technologies engaged therein, are determined by their success in the production of profit. A social form is determining technology, not the other way round - the tail is not wagging the dog.

2.3 Tensions, contradictions and fetters

The error that historical materialists make above -- of looking for a universal explanation for history at the expense of understanding the particular example in front of them is nothing new. It can be seen in the *Communist Manifesto*. Having asserted that feudalism fell due to contradictions between the forces and relations of production they declare that ‘A similar movement is going on before our own eyes’:

“For many a decade past the history of industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production, against the property re-

⁹ See Marx, K. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. London, Penguin Books, 1976 – in particular, Part IV: Production of Relative Surplus Value.

¹⁰ This is just a shorthand for the ability of money to make more money when it is advanced in production: hiring workers, putting them to work, selling the product for a profit.

lations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeois and of its rule. It is enough to mention the commercial crises that by their periodical return put the existence of the entire bourgeois society on its trial, each time more threateningly. In these crises, a great part not only of the existing products, but also of the previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed. In these crises, there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity – the epidemic of over-production. Society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation, had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed; and why? Because there is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce. The productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary, they have become too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and so soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society, endanger the existence of bourgeois property.”^a

^a Manifesto of the Communist Party, chapter 1

Marx and Engels identify a real phenomenon - that a crisis in the capitalist economy is characterised by abundance, not scarcity. Lots of useful stuff has been produced, and is sitting idle in warehouses -- the problem is that it cannot be sold. Unfortunately, they then ascribe this outcome to a transhistorical law rather than dig into why this is a result produced under capitalism. Once Marx had done the necessary digging, he could provide an account of what drove an increase in the productive forces¹¹, and, in Capital volume 3, why such crises were less the inevitable hallmarks of a mode of production in decline than the conditions for a new cycle of accumulation, with more industry and more commerce.

Returning to the Communist Manifesto’s observation that capitalism is prone to regular crises, with the benefit of hindsight we can see that the contradictions behind these downturns have not ended the existence of bourgeois property.

States have intervened to prevent a collapse. In part they succeed in doing so, insofar as an economic crisis does not immediately develop into a collapse. Sometimes they do not succeed, as for example in the Great Depression at the end of the 1920s. Then a great deal of capital -- not to mention livelihoods -- is destroyed. In the end, capital accumulation starts all over again.

What perhaps should be a bit surprising and worth inquiring about¹², is that many people have accommodated themselves to the ups and downs of the business cycle, as they do to the seasons or the latest weather report.

¹¹ See Capital volume 1: Part IV: Production of Relative Surplus Value

¹² For more on the everyday common sense that allows people to make such accommodations, see [Fantastic Thoughts and Where to Find Them](#).

2.4 Base ideas on base and superstructure

Historical materialism can be a recognition that a mode of production fundamentally shapes the society that produces this way. Yes, it does make a difference for other social relations whether surplus product is extracted by sheer force or by voluntary contracts. Often though this (somewhat banal) insight is treated as a dogma, base determines superstructure, without taking its object of enquiry seriously.

For example, many historical materialists conceive of the capitalist state as a more or less sophisticated version of it being the 'executive committee of the bourgeoisie'. In their *Introduction to Historical Materialism*,¹³ the International Marxist Tendency describe the different forms of the state that accompanied specific modes of production. They cite the feudal state incorporating and supporting landowners - the nobility and clergy, and the rise of the nation-state as a growing capitalist class disrupted the old order. Quoting Lenin, they highlight the commonality of these forms of the state, rather than their particularity:

"In all class societies the state came into existence as 'an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another'."

This is not a terrible generalisation, but it's inadequate for understanding the class society we are immediately concerned with, capitalism. Individual capitalists' immediate interests are based in the drive to accumulate capital, and the thus produced need to survive against competitors, and therefore these interests are particular and often in conflict. As a class however, they do have shared interests -- the ongoing conditions for capital accumulation such as the protection of private property and the regulation of contracts between the people that own it, infrastructure, a favourable national economy, and a working class sufficiently alive and capable of work.

This requires an independent institution, powerful enough to enforce these conditions, and able to recognise and take decisions that might negatively affect individual capitals in the interests of capital itself. This might be industrial policy, choosing to support or abandon industries considered to be future prospects or remnants from the past, or in the case of the recent pandemic going so far as to in effect hit capital's off switch -- pausing capitalist accumulation in the interests of its longer term survival.¹⁴

Given how capital relies on the working class, the state must also make itself a workers' state -- regulating working hours and workplace safety, taking money from the economy to provide healthcare and education, setting a minimum wage and providing in and out of work benefits.¹⁵

¹³ . <https://www.marxist.com/what-is-marxism-economics-materialism.htm#historicalmaterialism>

¹⁴ <https://critisticuffs.org/texts/covid-19-and-crisis-20>

¹⁵ <https://critisticuffs.org/texts/the-dubious-benefits-of-a-workers-state-universal-credit>

2.5 The working class enter the stage, on a historic mission

In response to accusations of determinism, historical materialists will point to the role they give to class and class struggle. In the hands of Marxist-Leninists in particular, the role of class has been to act as a lever on underlying economic contradictions, often not so much avoiding determinism as shifting it to a different arena. Under capitalism they ascribed to the working class a “great historical mission – to emancipate itself and the whole of the [...] people from political and economic slavery”.¹⁶

Giving the working class a mission is somewhat different from noting its condition -- a separation from those things it needs to reproduce itself -- and what might happen should people in that position conclude that things should be otherwise. They were placing a demand on it, viewing the people in the class as an object rather than a subject, and of course were obligated to try to lead them into fulfilling this historic role.

3 Part 3: What are we left with?

The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude, as this grows directly out of production itself and reacts back on it in turn as a determinant. On this is based the entire configuration of the economic community which grows up out of the actual relations of production, and hence also its specific political form. It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers – a relationship whose particular form naturally corresponds always to a certain level of development of the type and manner of labour and hence to its social productive power – in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice and hence also the political form of the relationship of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the specific form state in each case.^a

^a Marx, K, *Capital Volume 3*, London, Penguin Books, 1981, p. 927

3.1 A materialist conception of history?

There is a fundamental need for people to interact with nature in order to produce the things we need in order to survive. Every society needs to be able to produce and reproduce the means of its own existence as a precondition for that existence. How it does that will influence the institutions and social relations within that society.

To put it another way, any form of society must produce a surplus if it is to continue to exist. What happens to that surplus is an important question, and historically this is more specifically put as ‘who

¹⁶ Lenin, *The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement*, Lenin Collected Works, 1964, Volume 4, pp. 366-371

appropriates it and how?'. The particularity of the answer is an essential basis for understanding that society.

The productive power that enables there to be a surplus does not just rest on technology. It relies on the social relations that give the technology purpose. It relies on a form of governance that to a greater or lesser degree ensures the conditions for that economic activity.

Social and economic forces can condition the actions of individuals, but they do not determine them. A society might be violently coercive, or rely on a mixture of ideology, coercion and the silent compulsion of economic relations, but this does not stop people from assessing a situation and acting based on their conclusions.

Any work on Marx and history is obliged to cite the following quote, from *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, but there is no reason to imbue it with the idea that the circumstances referred to are the transhistorical factors of the forces and relations of production:

Men make their own history but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past.

For example, a group of peasants decided that coming together to work and live communally was a good idea in 1649.¹⁷ This idea was based on their current situation, needs, and interests. The question of whether that was feasible needs to be looked at in its context - the specific circumstances (material, social and political) they inherited and encountered, not dismissed because we did not yet have the steam engine.

3.2 Forces and relations of production

How a society produces is clearly important. These categories can be useful, depending on the object of concern, but the idea of productive forces as a transhistorical motor of history is just wrong. It is a mistake to look more to tools than to the social relations of those who use them.

Historical Materialists posit a transhistorical drive for the development of productive forces while at the same time neglecting what it is that drives this development within capitalism. They have taken a particular phenomenon and generalised it, at once failing to explain this generality (what *does* drive development across history?¹⁸) and losing an explanation for its specific form under capitalism (now

¹⁷ The Diggers. From their manifesto: "This Declares likewise to all Laborers, or such as are called Poor people, that they shall not dare to work for Hire, for any Landlord, or for any that is lifted up above others; for by their labours, they have lifted up Tyrants and Tyranny; and by denying to labor for Hire, they shall pull them down again. He that works for another, either for Wages, or to pay him Rent, works unrighteously, and still lifts up the Curse ['the Curse' is private property]; but they that are resolved to work and eat together, making the Earth a Common Treasury, doth joyn hands with Christ, to lift up the Creation from Bondage, and restores all things from the Curse."

¹⁸ Explaining the existence of something by stating that there is a drive that produces it is an empty explanation.

it is a historical drive rather than something that unfolds from the logic of capital accumulation).

3.3 The base/superstructure metaphor

This is an attempt to account for the non-economic institutions, structures and ideas within a society -- and it is not an absurd one. The conditions that determine production affect the rest of society. Class society does not end at the factory or office door. States do not practice imperialism for the fun of it.

However, this is an abstract account of an explanation, which is not a substitute for an actual explanation of an object. The truth of this generalisation should emerge from investigation -- in itself, as we have seen it offers little help in understanding the state for example.

Another error that can arise is to see the relationship between base and superstructure as a functional one (Cohen goes so far as to explicitly base his understanding of HM in functionalism). This means explaining e.g. education by stating that it has the function of providing adequately educated workers for the base.¹⁹

The problem with the base and superstructure metaphor is not the recognition of the importance of the economic relations within a society, but how it is employed. Treated as a dogma it stands in the way of enquiry -- its truth in relation to a particular object will emerge from analysis. If your project is to understand this world in order to change it, this is not served by making reality fit a preconceived model.

3.4 A materialist history of historical materialism

Ultimately, the problem with historical materialism is itself a matter of history. A belief in an inevitable final victory has lain behind mass political organisations as they moved from gradualists to reformists.²⁰ Leninist and Trotskyist parties have viewed the working class as a flock to be patiently

¹⁹ Functionalism explains something by its effect: 'education has the effect of providing capitalist employers with a flow of workers with knowledge adequate to their needs'.

It posits 'needs' that are being met. This does not explain the thing meeting that need. 'x exists because it does y for z' is not an explanation either of how x came to be there, or of what it is, other than that 'it does y for z'. It's as if the need for an effect was somehow generating its cause.

This is a common way of explaining things - e.g. 'racism in a capitalist society has the function of dividing and thus weakening the power of the working class'. The noted effect may be true, but this is not an adequate account of the object itself.

Note that function is not the same as purpose. It is quite different to say that education has the *purpose* of providing adequately educated workers for the base. A purpose is given to something -- it has a cause, one that could arise out of human intent, or even the inner logic of a social object such as capital. The purpose can then be explained. To describe something as having a function offers nothing more than an observation.

²⁰ "Democracy cannot do away with the class antagonisms of capitalist society. Neither can it avoid the final outcome of these antagonisms -- the overthrow of present society. One thing it can do. It cannot abolish the revolution, but it can avert many premature, hopeless revolutionary attempts, and render superfluous many revolutionary uprisings. It cre-

shepherded to their rightful destination, even if it means treating them like idiots.²¹ Historical materialism can even be employed to reassure those querying the socialist nature of a capitalist economy under the control of an authoritarian state.²² Time and time again the idea that there is one simple trick to understand history and where it is going has led to egregious mistakes and absurdities.

A particular cruel punchline of history is that “historical materialism” is the hallmark of radicals and revolutionaries. A theory that predicts the collapse of the rejected system is a theory peddled by those busying themselves to bring it to its knees. For social democrats, who have completed their journey to responsible co-managers of the capitalist mode of production, historical materialism has fulfilled its historic mission in justifying their journey.

ates clearness regarding the relative strength of the different parties and classes. It does not abolish their antagonisms, nor postpone their ultimate object, but it does operate to hinder the rising class from sometimes attempting the accomplishment of tasks of which it is not yet capable, and to keep the governing class from refusing concessions that it no longer possesses the strength to maintain. The direction of development is not thereby changed, but its course becomes steadier and more peaceful.” *Karl Kautsky, The Road to Power (1909)*

²¹ E.g. ‘transitional demands’ and the front page of any Trot newspaper at a demo.

²² “There are people who believe that communism is an unattainable hope, or even that it is beyond hoping for – that communism is an illusion. This touches upon whether historical materialism or historical idealism is the proper frame through which to view world affairs. The fundamental reason why some of our comrades have weak ideals and faltering beliefs is that their views lack a firm grounding in historical materialism. We should educate and guide cadres and the broader mass of Party members so that we can unite our the common ideal of practicing socialism with Chinese characteristics together with our lofty ideal of securing Communism.” *Xi Jinping speech to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2013*