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historical materialism The term refers to that central body of doctrine, frequently known as the materialist conception of history, which constitutes the social-scientific core of Marxist theory. According to Engels's 1892 introduction to *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, historical materialism

designate[s] 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 struggle of these classes against one another.

Engels credited Marx with being the originator of historical materialism, which he

saw as one of Marx's two great scientific discoveries (the other being the theory of surplus value), while Marx wrote that Engels had arrived at the materialist conception of history independently. In accord with the theory itself they stressed the historical and material preconditions of its formulation.

Although scholars disagree about the degree of continuity of various themes between Marx's early and later writings, few would deny that the materialist view of history which Marx and Engels began to hammer out at the time of *The German Ideology* (1845/46) — though not without its intellectual antecedents — constitutes that which is, and was believed by them to be, distinctive of their world view. Earlier adumbrations of this conception in their writings may or may not demonstrate that one or the other of them had already reached a recognizably Marxist perspective prior to 1844–5. At this time, however, they began quite self-consciously to utilize historical materialism as, in Marx's words, the 'guiding thread' of all their subsequent studies.

Historical materialism is not, strictly speaking, a philosophy; rather, it is best interpreted as an empirical theory (or, perhaps more accurately, a collection of empirical theses). Thus Marx and Engels frequently underscore the scientific character of their enterprise, and *The German Ideology* claims that its approach rests not on philosophically derived abstractions or dogmas, but rather on observation and an accurate depiction of real conditions; in short, on premises that 'can thus be verified in a purely empirical way'. Occasionally, Marx and Engels offer simple a priori arguments in favour of historical materialism, but these are not very compelling. A theory which makes such bold claims about the nature of history and society can be vindicated, if at all, only by its ability to provide a viable research programme for social and historical investigations.

These claims receive their most memorable statement in a very compact passage from Marx's 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Although the reliability of the 'Preface' has not gone unchallenged, its authority is bolstered by the fact that Marx refers to it at least twice

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in *Capital* as a guide to his materialist perspective. The themes of the 'Preface' reverberate throughout the Marxian corpus and must, of course, be interpreted in the light of the elaboration they receive elsewhere. In the 'Preface' Marx contends that the economic structure of society, constituted by its relations of production, is the real foundation of society. It is the basis 'on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness'. On the other hand society's relations of production themselves 'correspond to a definite stage of development of [society's] material productive forces'. In this manner, 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general'.

As the society's productive forces develop, they clash with existing production relations, which now fetter their growth (see FORCES AND RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION). 'Then begins an epoch of social revolution' as this contradiction divides society and as people become, in a more or less ideological form, 'conscious of this conflict and fight it out.' The conflict is resolved in favour of the productive forces, and new, higher relations of production, whose material preconditions have 'matured in the womb of the old society', emerge which better accommodate the continued growth of society's productive capacity. The bourgeois mode of production represents the most recent of several progressive epochs in the economic formation of society, but it is the last antagonistic form of production. With its demise the prehistory of humanity will come to a close.

As the above illustrates, a core thesis of historical materialism - though one which some Marxists have eschewed - is that the different socioeconomic organizations of production which have characterized human history arise or fall as they enable or impede the expansion of society's productive capacity. The growth of the productive forces thus explains the general course of human history. The productive forces, however, include not just the means of production (tools, machines, factories and so on), but labour power - the skills, knowledge, experience, and other human faculties used in

work. The productive forces represent the powers society has at its command in material production.

The relations of production, which are said to correspond to society's productive level, link productive forces and human beings in the process of production. These relations are of two broad types: on the one hand those technical relations that are necessary for the actual production process to proceed; on the other the relations of economic control (which are legally manifested as property ownership) that govern access to the forces and products of production. The contrast is between the material work relations and their socioeconomic integument, and Marx pointedly criticizes those who confound the two. Types of economic structure are differentiated by their dominant social production relations. 'Whatever the social form of production, labourers and means of production always remain factors of it. ... The specific manner in which [their] union is accomplished distinguishes the different economic epochs of the structure of society from one another' (*Capital* II, ch. 1).

The related concept MODE OF PRODUCTION is similarly equivocal. Sometimes Marx uses it in the restricted sense of the technical nature or manner of producing, as when capitalism is said to introduce 'constant daily revolutions in the mode of production'. More frequently, Marx employs the concept in a second sense, namely that of the social system (or manner or mode) of producing, which is carried on within, and as a result of, a certain set of ownership relations. Thus, capitalist relations of production define a specific connection between people and productive forces, while the capitalist mode of production involves the production of commodities (see COMMODITY), a certain manner of obtaining surplus, labour time determination of value, and so on. (In addition, Marx sometimes uses 'mode of production' to encompass both the technical and social properties of the way production proceeds.) More than one mode of production may subsist within any actual social formation, but the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* maintains that 'in all forms of society there is one determinate kind of production which assigns ranks and influence to all the others'.

The expansion of the productive forces determines the relations and mode of production which obtain because, as Marx wrote to Annenkov, 'men never relinquish what they have won'. In order to retain 'the fruits of civilization' they will change their way of producing – either their material or social relations of production or both – to accommodate the acquired productive forces and facilitate their continued advance. The resulting economic structure in turn shapes the legal and political superstructure. Thus the productive forces do not fashion the social world directly. Only the broad contours of history, the main forms of society's socioeconomic evolution, are set by the development of society's productive capacity.

The relations of production can influence the momentum and qualitative direction of the development of the productive forces. Capitalism in particular is distinguished by its tendency to raise society to a productive level undreamt of before. This is in line with historical materialism, however, since Marx's thesis is that the relations of production which emerge do so precisely because they have the ability to promote the development of society's productive capacity. Relatedly, it is often noted that the productive forces which marked the birth of capitalism are not those forces – for example, the factories and machinery typical of large scale mechanized production – that are distinctive of capitalism. Historical materialism, though, envisages the emergence of capitalism as a response to the then existing level of productive forces.

Some present-day Marxists deny the dominant role of the productive forces in favour of the idea that relations and forces are mutually determining. But while Marx certainly allows for their interaction and indeed describes specific instances of the relations of production influencing the productive forces, in all his general theoretical pronouncements the basic determination runs the other way. Because historical materialism sees the productive forces as enjoying explanatory primacy, it is able to give an answer to the question of why in general different socioeconomic formations arise when they do.

The legal and political institutions of society

are clearly superstructural for Marx: their fundamental character is determined by the nature of the existing economic structure. Which other social institutions are properly part of the superstructure is a matter of debate (see BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE). Certainly Marx thought that the various spheres and realms of society reflect the dominant mode of production and that the general consciousness of an epoch is shaped by the nature of its production. The Marxist theory of IDEOLOGY contends, in part, that certain ideas originate or are widespread because they sanction existing social relations or promote particular class interests. The economy's determination of legal and political structures, though, will tend to be relatively direct, while its influence over other social realms, culture, and consciousness generally is more attenuated and nuanced. Historical materialism perceives a general hierarchy among the realms of social life, but these relations must be elaborated, not just for society in general, but also for each specific type of socioeconomic organization. It is a law for Marx that the superstructure is derived from the base, but this is a law about laws; in each social formation, more specific laws govern the precise nature of this general derivation. In line with this, an important footnote in *Capital* I (ch. 1, sect. 4) suggests that the mode of production of an era determines the relative importance of the various spheres of the social world of that period. The nature and strength of the mechanisms hypothesized by the base-superstructure metaphor, however, are among the most vexed and controversial questions of historical materialism. Marx's theory does not view the superstructure as an epi-phenomenon of the economic base, nor overlook the necessity of legal and political institutions. It is precisely because a superstructure is needed to organize and stabilize society that the economic structure brings about those institutions that are best suited to it. Nor are superstructure and base related like a statue and plinth; that superstructures affect or 'react back on' the base is one of the fundamental tenets of historical materialism.

Law, in particular, is necessary to 'sanction the existing order' and grant it 'independence

from mere chance and arbitrariness' (*Capital* III, ch. 47). This function itself gives the legal realm some autonomy since the existing relations of production are represented and legitimated in an abstract, codified form, which in turn fosters the ideological illusion that the law is entirely autonomous with respect to the economic structure. In addition, under capitalism the 'fictio juris of a contract' between free agents obscures the real nature of production, in particular, the 'invisible threads' which bind the wage-labourer to capital (*Capital* I, ch. 23). In precapitalist societies, for example in feudalism, tradition and custom perform a similar stabilizing function and may also win a degree of autonomy. There, the true nature of the social relations of production is obscured by entanglement with the relations of personal domination which characterize the other spheres of feudal life.

Marx's stress on class analysis, surprisingly absent from the 'Preface', connects with the above themes of historical materialism in several significant ways. In the social organization of production, people stand in different relations to the forces and products of production and in any given mode of production these relations will be of certain characteristic sorts. The individual's economic position as that is understood in terms of the existing social production relations establishes certain material interests in common with others and determines class membership. Hence follow the familiar definitions of the bourgeoisie and proletariat by reference to the purchase and sale, respectively, of labour power (and the underlying ownership or non-ownership of the means of production).

A central thesis of historical materialism is that class position, so defined, determines the characteristic consciousness or world view of its members. For example Marx's discussion of the Legitimists and Orleanists in *18th Brumaire* emphasizes that on the basis of its socio-economic position each class creates 'an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life'. The differing material interests of classes divide them and lead to their struggle. Classes differ in the extent to which their members perceive themselves as a class, so that antagonisms between

classes may not be discerned by the participants, or may be understood only in a mystified or ideological form (see CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS).

The ultimate success or failure of a class is determined by its relation to the advance of the productive forces. In the words of *The German Ideology*, 'the conditions under which definite productive forces can be applied are the conditions of the rule of a definite class of society'. That class which has the capacity and the incentive to introduce or preserve the relations of production required to accommodate the advance of the productive forces has its hegemony ensured. Thus Marx thought that the eventual success of the proletarian cause, like the earlier rise of the bourgeoisie, was guaranteed by the fundamental currents of history while, for example, the heroic slave revolts of the ancient world were doomed to failure. Historical materialism views class rule, hitherto, as both inevitable and necessary to force the productivity of the direct producers beyond the subsistence level. 'No antagonism, no progress', states *The Poverty of Philosophy* (ch. I). 'This is the law that civilization has followed. . . . Till now the productive forces have been developed by virtue of this system of class antagonism.' The productive progress brought by capitalism, however, eliminates both the feasibility of, and the historical rationale for, class rule. Since the state is primarily the vehicle by which a class secures its rule, it will wither away in post-class society.

Historical materialism contends that class conflict and the basic trajectory of human history is accounted for by the advance of the productive forces. Their advance, however, must be understood in terms of a theoretical model that reveals the character of the specific modes of production involved. Such a theory will be very abstract with regard to any particular society. Thus, for example, Marx presents the evolution of capitalism in abstraction from the specific physiognomy of any particular capitalist nation state. *Capital* underwrites the claim that socialism is 'inevitable', but by the same token it does not empower one to predict the arrival of socialism at any particular time or place — only to affirm that

the tendency of capitalist development is such as to bring it about. Nor does the specific course of each society simply repeat some universal dialectic of forces and relations of production. Societies are rarely isolated, untouched and uninfluenced by productive advances outside them. Accordingly, every social group of the globe is not fated to pass through the same stages of economic development, nor is the evolution of any particular social formation solely a matter of internal productive events. Although historical materialism permits countries to lag behind or even skip steps, their course must still be accounted for within the over-arching pattern of socio-economic evolution, and that development is due to the productive forces.

The 'Preface' designates the Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production as the major epochs in humanity's advance, but these mark the general stages of socioeconomic evolution as a whole – not the steps which history obliges every nation, without exception, to climb (see STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT). In a famous letter of November 1877, Marx characteristically denied propounding 'any historico-philosophical theory of the *marche générale* imposed by fate upon every people'; but this oft-quoted remark does not amount to a rejection of historical determinism. Marx could consistently believe in a necessary, productive-force-determined evolution of history without holding that every social group is preordained to follow the same course. It seems likely, in fact, that Marx would have been willing to revise his particular tabulation of historical periods (or at least the pre-feudal ones), since he did not analyse in detail humanity's early modes of production. Modification of Marx's historical schema as well as of his analysis of capitalism (and the projected transition to socialism) is in principle compatible with the basic tenets of historical materialism. It should be borne in mind that historical materialism does not pretend to explain every last detail of history. From its broad purview, many historical events, and certainly the specific forms they take, are accidental. Nor does the theory seek to explain scientifically individual behaviour, though it attempts to situate that behaviour

within its historical confines. In so far as there are ineluctable tendencies in history, these result from, not despite, the choices of individuals. The explanatory ambitions of historical materialism as a social-scientific theory do not commit it to philosophical determinism.

Because historical materialism is so central to Marxism, diverse political and intellectual currents in Marxism have frequently distinguished themselves by their differing interpretations of that theory. One fairly standard interpretation has been presented above, but controversy rages over the basic concepts and theorems of the theory, and the relative importance of its various components. The task of rendering historical materialism as an empirically plausible theory without reducing it to a collection of truisms has proved very formidable. Given the far-ranging claims of the theory and the lack of an interpretative consensus, an accurate assessment of its viability is exceedingly difficult. WHS

Reading

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historicism The uses of the term 'historicism' are, in Marxist thought, almost as protean as its original meanings in pre-Hegelian German social thought. There are two main senses:

First, there is the historicism associated with the work of Karl Popper. For Popper, Hegel and Marx are guilty of the misguided and noxious view that history has a pattern and a