

## Carl Marx and Materialistic Interpretation of History

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**Abstract:** Marx introduced the concept of spirit and dialectical materialism, respectively, into the study of world historical development. Former historians had focused on cyclical events of the rise and decline of rulers and nations. Process of nationalization of history, as part of national revivals in 19th century, resulted with separation of "one's own" history from common universal history by such way of perceiving, understanding and treating the past that constructed history as history of a nation. The French Annales School radically changed the focus of historical research in France during the 20th century. Fernand Braudel wanted history to become more scientific and less subjective, and demanded more quantitative evidence. Furthermore, he introduced a socio-economic and geographic framework to historical questions.

**Key words:** Marx's Life and Works: Marx as a Young Hegelian: Marx's Theory of Historical Materialism: The Annales School:

### Introduction

Karl Marx (1818–1883) is best known not as a philosopher but as a revolutionary communist, whose works inspired the foundation of many communist regimes in the twentieth century. It is hard to think of many who have had as much influence in the creation of the modern world. Trained as a philosopher, Marx turned away from philosophy in his mid-twenties, towards economics and politics. However, in addition to his overtly philosophical early work, his later writings have many points of contact with contemporary philosophical debates, especially in the philosophy of history and the social sciences, and in moral and political philosophy. Historical materialism-Marx's theory of history-is centered around the idea that forms of society rise and fall as they further and then impede the development of human productive power.

Marx sees the historical process as proceeding through a necessary series of modes of production, characterized by class struggle, culminating in communism. Marx's economic analysis of capitalism is based on his version of the labour theory of value, and includes the analysis of capitalist profit as the extraction of surplus value from the exploited proletariat. The analysis of history and economics come together in Marx's prediction of the inevitable economic breakdown of capitalism, to be replaced by communism. However Marx refused to speculate in detail about the nature of communism, arguing that it would arise through historical processes, and was not the realisation of a pre-determined moral ideal.

**Marx's Life and Works:** Marx was born on 5 May, 1818, in Trier, a small, originally Roman, city on the river Moselle. Many of Marx's ancestors were



rabbis, but his father, Heinrich, a lawyer of liberal political views, converted from Judaism to Christianity and Marx was baptized with the rest of his family in 1824. At school, the young Marx excelled in literary subjects (a prescient schoolteacher comments, however, that his essays were ‘marred by an exaggerated striving after unusual, picturesque expression’). In 1835, he entered the University of Bonn to study Law. At the end of 1836, he transferred to Berlin and became a member of the Young Hegelian *Doktorclub*, a bohemian group whose leading figure was the theologian, Bruno Bauer. The views of the *Doktorclub* turned increasingly radical (to some extent, it would seem, under Marx’s influence) in the late 1830s. Marx’s father died in 1838 and in the next year-perhaps not coincidentally-Marx abandoned the law in favour of a doctorate in philosophy. His thesis, *Differenz der demokritischen and epikureischen Naturphilosophie* (Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature) was accepted by the University of Jena in 1841. Marx had hoped to use it to gain an academic position, but, after Bruno Bauer’s suspension from his post at the University of Bonn, it became apparent that such hopes would have to be abandoned in the current political climate.

Marx turned instead to journalism, involving himself with the newly-founded *Rheinische Zeitung* and taking over the editorship in October 1842. However, the paper came increasingly into conflict with the Prussian government and was banned in March 1843. At this point, Marx decided to move abroad. In the summer he married Jenny von Westphalen (after an engagement of six years) and during a

long honeymoon in Kreuznach worked on *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right) and the essay ‘*Zur Judenfrage*’ (‘On the Jewish Question’) in which he started to formulate his disagreements with his fellow Young Hegelians. He and Jenny moved to Paris in October of that year. It was in 1844 that Marx met up again with Friedrich Engels and the alliance that was to last for the rest of Marx’s life was formed. Together Marx and Engels wrote *Die Heilige Familie* (The Holy Family), a polemic against Bruno Bauer. More important, however, was the body of writing on economics and philosophy that Marx produced at this time which are generally known as The Paris Manuscripts.

Marx was expelled from France in 1845 and moved to Brussels. In the spring of 1845, he wrote for his own clarification a series of ‘Theses’ on Feuerbach that are one of the few mature statements that we have from him of his views on questions of epistemology and ontology. In 1845-46 Marx and Engels wrote *Die deutsche Ideologie* (The German Ideology) which, although it too remained unpublished, contains an authoritative account of their theory of history and, in particular, of the place of ideas in society. Marx’s developing economic views were given expression in a polemic against Proudhon, *La Misere de la Philosophie* (The Poverty of Philosophy), published in 1847.

The years of exile in Britain were difficult ones for Marx (and even more so for his loyal and devoted family). He was in constant financial difficulty and he had to rely heavily on Engels and other friends and relations for support. His theoretical activities were chiefly directed to the study of political economy and the



analysis of the capitalist system in particular. They culminated in the publication of Volume One of *Das Kapital* (Capital) in 1867. However, *Das Kapital* is the tip of a substantial iceberg of less important publications and unpublished writings. Amongst the former, the Preface to *Zur Kritik der politischen Okonomie* (A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy) published in 1859, contains the classic statement of Marx's materialist theory of history. Volumes Two and Three of *Das Kapital*, left unfinished at Marx's death, were edited and published posthumously by Engels. In addition, three volumes of *Theorien uber den Mehrwert* (Theories of Surplus-Value), a series of critical discussions of other political economists, written in 1862–63, were published in the early twentieth century. An extensive and more or less complete work, the *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Okonomie* (known both in English and in German as the *Grundrisse*) was written in 1857–58 but only published in 1939. The Introduction to the *Grundrisse* is the mature Marx's most extended discussion of the method of political economy. In addition, there exist numerous notebooks and preliminary drafts, many (if not, at the time of writing, all) of which have been published.

Political economy apart, Marx wrote three works on political events in France (*Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich* (Class Struggles in France) (1850), *Das achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* (The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte) (1852) and *The Civil War in France* (1871)). Among his many polemical writings, the *Kritik des Gothaer Programms* (Critique of the Gotha Programme) (1875) is particularly important for the light it throws on

Marx's conception of socialism and its relation to ideas of justice. Marx was in very poor health for the last ten years of his life and this seems to have sapped his energies for large-scale theoretical work. However, his engagement with the practical details of revolutionary politics was unceasing. He died on 14 March 1883 and is buried in Highgate Cemetery, London.

**Marx as a Young Hegelian:** Marx is relevant to philosophy in three ways: (1) as a philosopher himself, (2) as a critic of philosophy, of its aspirations and self-understanding, and (3) by the philosophical implications of work that is, in Marx's own understanding of it, not philosophical at all. These three aspects correspond, broadly speaking, to the stages in Marx's own intellectual development. This and the following section are concerned with the first stage.

The Young Hegelians, with whom Marx was associated at the beginning of his career, did not set out to be critics of Hegel. That they rapidly became so has to do with the consequences they drew from certain tensions within Hegel's thought. Hegel's central claim is that both nature and society embody the rational order of *Geist* (Spirit). Nevertheless, it did not follow, the Young Hegelians believed, that all societies express rationality to the fullest degree possible. This was the case in contemporary Germany. There was, in their view, a conflict between the essential rationality of *Geist* and the empirical institutions within which *Geist* had realized itself: Germany was 'behind the times'.

A second source of tension lay in Hegel's attitude towards religion. Hegel had been prepared to concede a role to religion as expressing the content of philosophy in immediate form. The Young Hegelians argued, however, that



the relationship between the truths of philosophy and religious ‘representation’ was, in fact, antagonistic. In presenting reality not as the embodiment of reason but as the expression of the will of a personal god the Christian religion establishes a metaphysical dualism that is quite contrary to the secular ‘this-worldliness’ which (although Hegel himself might have been too cautious to spell it out fully) is the true significance of Hegel’s philosophy.

This was the position endorsed by Marx at the time of his doctoral dissertation. Its subject was taken from a period of Greek thought with parallels to Germany in Marx’s own time. Just as the Young Hegelians faced the problem of how to continue philosophy after Hegel, so Democritus and Epicurus wrote in the shadow of another great system, that of Aristotle. Marx’s sympathies are with Epicurus. He is more successful than Democritus, Marx believes, in combining materialism with an account of human agency. Furthermore, Marx admires Epicurus for his explicit critique of religion, the chief task of philosophy, he asserts, in all ages.

**Marx’s Theory of Historical Materialism:** Marx did not set out his theory of history in great detail. Accordingly, it has to be constructed from a variety of texts, both those where he attempts to apply a theoretical analysis to past and future historical events, and those of a more purely theoretical nature. Of the latter, the 1859 Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy* has achieved canonical status. However, *The German Ideology*, co-written with Engels in 1845, is a vital early source in which Marx first sets out the basics of the outlook of historical materialism. We shall briefly outline both texts, and then look at the reconstruction of Marx’s

theory of history in the hands of his philosophically most influential recent exponent, G.A. Cohen, who builds on the interpretation of the early Russian Marxist Plekhanov.

We should, however, be aware that Cohen’s interpretation is not universally accepted. Cohen provided his reconstruction of Marx partly because he was frustrated with the existing Hegelian-inspired ‘dialectical’ interpretations of Marx associated especially with Louis Althusser, which he felt did not provide a rigorous account of Marx’s views. However, some scholars believe that the interpretation that we shall focus on is faulty precisely for its lack of attention to the dialectic. One aspect of this criticism is that Cohen’s understanding has a surprisingly small role for the concept of class struggle, which is often felt to be central to Marx’s theory of history. Cohen’s explanation for this is that the 1859 Preface, on which his interpretation is based, does not give a prominent role to class struggle, and indeed it is not explicitly mentioned. Yet this reasoning is problematic for it is possible that Marx did not want to write in a manner that would engage the concerns of the police censor, and, indeed, a reader aware of the context may be able to detect an implicit reference to class struggle through the inclusion of such phrases as “then begins an era of social revolution,” and “the ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out”. Hence it does not follow that Marx himself thought that the concept of class struggle was relatively unimportant. Furthermore, when *A Critique of Political Economy* was replaced by *Capital*, Marx made no attempt to keep the 1859 Preface in print, and its content is reproduced just as a very much abridged footnote in



Capital. Nevertheless we shall concentrate here on Cohen's interpretation as no other account has been set out with comparable rigour, precision and detail.

✓ **The German Ideology:** In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels contrast their new materialist method with the idealism which had characterised previous German thought. Accordingly, they take pains to set out the 'premises of the materialist method'. They start, they say, from 'real human beings', emphasising that human beings are essentially productive, in that they must produce their means of subsistence in order to satisfy their material needs. The satisfaction of needs engenders new needs of both a material and social kind, and forms of society arise corresponding to the state of development of human productive forces. Material life determines, or at least 'conditions' social life, and so the primary direction of social explanation is from material production to social forms, and thence to forms of consciousness. As the material means of production develop, 'modes of co-operation' or economic structures rise and fall, and eventually communism will become a real possibility once the plight of the workers and their awareness of an alternative motivates them sufficiently to become revolutionaries.

✓ **Preface:** In the sketch of *The German Ideology*, all the key elements of historical materialism are present, even if the terminology is not yet that of Marx's more mature writings. Marx's statement in 1859

Preface renders much the same view in sharper form. Cohen's reconstruction of Marx's view in the Preface begins from what Cohen calls the Development Thesis, which is pre-supposed, rather than explicitly stated in the Preface. This is the thesis that the productive forces tend to develop, in the sense of becoming more powerful, over time. This states not that they always do develop, but that there is a tendency for them to do so. The productive forces are the means of production, together with productively applicable knowledge: technology, in other words. The next thesis is the primacy thesis, which has two aspects. The first states that the nature of the economic structure is explained by the level of development of the productive forces, and the second that the nature of the superstructure-the political and legal institutions of society-is explained by the nature of the economic structure. The nature of a society's ideology, which is to say the religious, artistic, moral and philosophical beliefs contained within society, is also explained in terms of its economic structure, although this receives less emphasis in Cohen's interpretation. Indeed many activities may well combine aspects of both the superstructure and ideology: a religion is constituted by both institutions and a set of beliefs.

✓ **Functional Explanation:** Prior to Cohen's work, historical materialism had not been regarded as a coherent view within English-language political philosophy. The antipathy is well summed up with the closing words of H.B. Acton's *The Illusion of the Epoch*: "Marxism is a



philosophical farrago”. One difficulty taken particularly seriously by Cohen is an alleged inconsistency between the explanatory primacy of the forces of production, and certain claims made elsewhere by Marx which appear to give the economic structure primacy in explaining the development of the productive forces. For example, in *The Communist Manifesto* Marx states that: ‘The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production.’ This appears to give causal and explanatory primacy to the economic structure-capitalism-which brings about the development of the forces of production. Cohen accepts that, on the surface at least, this generates a contradiction. Both the economic structure and the development of the productive forces seem to have explanatory priority over each other.

- ✓ **Rationality:** The driving force of history, in Cohen's reconstruction of Marx, is the development of the productive forces, the most important of which is technology. But what is it that drives such development? Ultimately, in Cohen's account, it is human rationality. Human beings have the ingenuity to apply themselves to develop means to address the scarcity they find. This on the face of it seems very reasonable. Yet there are difficulties. As Cohen himself acknowledges, societies do not always do what would be rational for an individual to do. Co-ordination problems may stand in our way, and there may be structural barriers. Furthermore, it is relatively rare for those who introduce new technologies to be motivated by the

need to address scarcity. Rather, under capitalism, the profit motive is the key. Of course it might be argued that this is the social form that the material need to address scarcity takes under capitalism. But still one may raise the question whether the need to address scarcity always has the influence that it appears to have taken on in modern times.

- ✓ **Alternative Interpretations:** Many defenders of Marx will argue that the problems stated are problems for Cohen's interpretation of Marx, rather than for Marx himself. It is possible to argue, for example, that Marx did not have a general theory of history, but rather was a social scientist observing and encouraging the transformation of capitalism into communism as a singular event. And it is certainly true that when Marx analyses a particular historical episode, as he does in the 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, any idea of fitting events into a fixed pattern of history seems very far from Marx's mind. On other views Marx did have a general theory of history but it is far more flexible and less determinate than Cohen insists (Miller). And finally, as noted, there are critics who believe that Cohen's interpretation is entirely wrong-headed (Sayers).

➤ **The Annales School:**

The Annales School of historiography, widely considered as one of the most important developments in the twentieth-century history-writing, formally emerged with the foundation of the journal *Annales d'histoire economique et sociale* (Annales of Economic and Social History) in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. In terms



of thematic range and methodological innovations, this School remained foremost in France and influenced history-writing in many other countries for decades and had followers all over the world. In this Unit you will learn about the context of its emergence, its contributions to history-writing, and the various new historiographical trends it gave rise to.

► **Social and Intellectual Context:**

The decade of the 1920s witnessed two paradoxical developments in France: The First World War had ended and its formal conclusion had occurred at Versailles, near Paris, under the Presidentship of the French Prime Minister, Clemenceau. Symbolically thus it was the victory of France over its traditional rival Germany, much more than the collective victory of the rest of Europe. The great French Impressionist painter, Claude Monet, had done the most renowned of his works, *Les Nymphaes*, the *Water Lilies*, ‘as a bouquet of flowers presented to France after the victory’, and a special museum structure, *L’Orangerie*, was built in the heart of Paris to display them. There was therefore an aura of celebration in the French air.

**Conclusion:**

In all ages and all human societies the history that has been written has been inseparable from the history through which the writers have lived. Few would wish to deny that what historians produce, like other forms of human thought and expression, is subject to change over time. Since the content of their thought and writing is itself concerned, in greater or lesser part, with changes over time, it would be strange-indeed paradoxical-if this were not so. There is, however, little agreement as to

how and why history, in the sense of what historians think and say, changes as and when it does. It is easy to postulate two extreme views on this, though few people today would be content with either as a sufficient explanation. At one end of the scale, history can be thought of as an autonomous intellectual discipline, with its own methodology and conventions, which has changed because its practitioners have become dissatisfied with its descriptive and explanatory capacity, and have seen-or thought that they have seen-a better way of doing it. At the other end of the scale, we may think of history as having been wholly conditioned by changes in the society in which historians are living; such external influences may be scientific, technological, military, economic, demographic, social, political, religious, cultural, etc., but these are what bring about different ways of thinking about the past and different ways in which it is portrayed in the writings of historians; naturally these include different explanations of historical change and continuity. For just as the pace and impact of other changes in human life have not been uniform in all times and places, so likewise changes in the practice of historical study and expression have come about unevenly. Thus, in the above discussion we come across several changes that history had witnessed since arrival of the modernity. Even in recent times also Historiography has undergone great paradigmatic change due to the recent developments in historical understanding. Historians are trying to provide new interpretations for the already used source materials and also use hitherto unused sources.



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