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Reinventing the wheel

Reconstructing historical materialism

Bachelor's thesis in Filosofi og etikk - bachelor

Supervisor: Ronny Selbæk Myhre

May 2024

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“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”

- Karl Marx, chapter I of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852.

Sammendrag

Karl Marx utviklet ulike teorier som forklarer utviklingen og de historiske karakteristikkene ved sosiale fenomener. Dette settet med teorier og tradisjonen inspirert av deres tolkning, ble kalt "historisk materialisme". Målet med dette essayet er å presentere ulike perspektiver utviklet i den historisk materialistiske tradisjonen med formålet om å rekonstruere en tentativ skisse over den historisk materialistiske teorien. Mitt argument vil være at historisk materialisme ikke i utgangspunktet handler om forrang til "tekniske", "materielle" årsaker, eller forrang til "økonomiske" årsaker, fremfor noen "immaterielle" årsaker; men har heller å gjøre med å fremheve «væren» – som sanselig menneskelig aktivitet – fremfor statiske skjematiskeringer av væren (i former som ofte kalles «ideologiske»). Dermed vil jeg også hevde at historisk materialisme ikke er en deterministisk teori, og heller ikke en teori med en reduksjonistisk behandling av strukturer, men snarere fremstiller at sosial utvikling involverer ulike «organiske helheter» eller «strukturerte prosesser» som er basert på kontinuerlig menneskelig aktivitet. Essayet skal bestå av 4 seksjoner, hvor den første seksjonen er introduksjonen til de problemstillingene jeg prøver å svare på og den generelle skissen av essayets mål, begrensninger og struktur. Dette skal følges av en seksjon som forsøker å skissere historisk materialisme, og dens forhold til "idealisme" og "ikke-historisk materialisme". Den tredje delen skal behandle spørsmålet om aktørskap. Essayet skal avsluttes med en oppsummering og formulering av essayets argumentasjon.

Abstract

Karl Marx developed various theories explaining the development and historical characteristics of social phenomena. This set of theories and the tradition inspired by their interpretation, came to be called “historical materialism”. The aim of this essay is to present various perspectives developed in the historical materialist tradition with the aim of reconstructing a tentative sketch of the historical materialist theory. My argument will be that historical materialism is not primarily concerned, as it is sometimes interpreted, with the primacy of “technical” “material” causes, or the primacy of “economic” causes over some “immaterial” causes; but rather has to do with emphasising “being” – as sensuous

human activity – over static schematisations of that being (in forms that are often termed “ideological”). Thus, I will also argue that historical materialism is not a deterministic theory, nor a theory with a reductionistic treatment of structures, but rather conceptualises social development as involving various “organic wholes” or “structured processes” that are predicated on continuous human activity. The essay will consist of 4 sections, with the first section being the introduction the problems that I am attempting to respond to and the general sketch of the essay’s goals, limitations and structure. This will be followed by a section attempting to sketch out historical materialism, and its relationship to “idealism” and “non-historical materialism”. The third section will treat the issue of agency. The essay will conclude with a summary and formulation of the essay’s argument.

1. Introduction

Karl Marx advocated a theory of the historical character of the human societies including a view of historical change that came to be known as “historical materialism”. The questions of how this theory should be interpreted and developed inspired a tradition of social analysis, with adherents throughout centuries and over all corners of the world. Various theorists, from Engels to Althusser, discussed the nature of this theory, furthering their own theses. In this essay my goal is to elaborate on some of the perspectives expressed in the development of this tradition and, through this, point at the direction of my own view with suggestions for where further study might be valuable.

“Historical materialism” is a disputed concept, there are many claimants to it, and many critics who have deemed it dead a thousand times. The goal of this endeavour is not to rediscover some, now lost, “authentic” historical materialism, and defend it thus from its critics. Rather, it is to draw from a tradition whose adherents shared an insight that I find valuable. Whether this or that idea corresponds with the original thoughts and intentions of a theoretician is valuable insofar as it can lead to a fuller appreciation of that theoretician and their body of work, ground further study and critique. But at the end of the day, to what degree a theoretician’s views are valuable is not determined by their correspondence to their sources of inspiration. The goal of this endeavour is also not to put forth a definitive apologia of historical materialism.

This essay *does* however aim to be an argument for historical materialism in a certain sense, as relevant to, and useful in, our circumstances, as a guide for study and analysis, which themselves may point in an actionable direction.

When attempting to elaborate “historical materialism”, it is necessary to start with a broad outline. As mentioned, the term refers to the tradition of social analysis that has its roots in the works of Marx and Engels – even though Marx himself never used this name with regards to his theories of social analysis the name can provide us with a helpful tool for getting an overview of this tradition that emerged from Marx’s theories, it tells us that this tradition is a materialism of some kind, but distinguished by it being “historical”. What is it distinguished

from? The first section of the main body of the essay will centre around discussing this question. In my discussion of historical materialism, I chose to direct some particular emphasis also to questions of “agency”, as this seems to be a matter where a lot of discussions have taken place, and still take place. A further reason is that there seems to be a general impression that historical materialism is essentially a “deterministic” theory and is some form of economic-determinism or technological-determinism¹, and thus in some way negates or ignores human agency. This is an impression that I disagree with and believe factors significantly to both the issues I discuss, and the reception of historical materialism itself.

The main body of this essay will thus be separated into two sections before the conclusion, one on “historical materialism” and one on “agency”. The sections will not be demarcated absolutely from one another and will build into each other. Each section will take up a general analysis of the issue, discussing the various interpretations and views on these topics furthered by theoreticians adhering to, or adjacent to, the historical materialist tradition. Each section will conclude with my tentative suggestions on these respective issues, building up to a hopefully coherent outline of historical materialism, though this outline will naturally be limited by both my capacities and the framework of this essay.

Historical materialism is understood traditionally to be distinct from both something termed “idealism” (often, though not exclusively, with regards to the theories of Hegel), and some other species of “materialism” that are conceived as being, in various ways, “vulgar” or “metaphysical” or “non-dialectical” – the discussion of these separations will be the issue of section 2. The first subsection, 2.1, will deal with discussions of “idealism”, specifically, the relationship between the theories of Hegel and those of Marx (and their followers). Here I will suggest that a particular popular conception of this relationship found amongst Marxists – which I term the “inversion” view – is faulty, primarily in its understanding of the Hegelian philosophy and the meaning of “idealism”. Further in this subsection I will try to shortly sketch a better (or at least more fruitful for the purposes of my essay) way of conceptualising this project. The next subsection, 2.2, will continue my critique of this “inversion” view, through presenting an analysis of the ways in which the concept of “materialism” was understood by two sides of the “Machist” controversy. I will suggest that the conception of “materialism” in both sides of the controversy represented the framework of the “inversion” view, but that there is the kernel of a more fruitful view centred around the concept of “human practice”. I will argue that such a conception of materialism, in the context of historical materialism, is more fruitful and relates to an older conception already found in Marx. This will continue in the concluding subsection, 2.3, where I will try to present this view as meaningfully representative of Marx’s theory (or at least as meaningfully a Marxian theory), as against other conceptions of Marx’s theory of historical materialism. These conceptions will include (albeit, rather superficially) G. A. Cohen’s presentation of Marx’s

¹ See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2016), 68; or for example Allen Wood, *Karl Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 63.

theory of history, and Allen Wood's discussion of whether or not (or to what degree) Marx's theory of history is deterministic. Central to this discussion will be the concepts of "base" and "superstructure" and the relationship between them. Counter to them, I will pose an interpretation of Marx's theory of history (and political economy), based on my preceding discussion in the section, and Ellen Meiksins Wood's works.

This naturally leads to questions of agency, and as such will be followed by the section on agency. Where I will start by presenting various models of agency proposed in the historical materialist tradition, or that criticise the positions in that tradition. I will argue on this basis that it is necessary to understand discussions of agency, in the context of historical materialism, through questions about political action, subjectivity etc. Through commentary on the theoreticians whose views are presented, I will argue for a version of agency that exists in a way constructed, conditioned, and mediated by various emergent, dynamic, "organic" wholes; significantly, those like the class society, classes themselves (understood in a historical materialist sense), and those "entities" like the state, parties, etc. – or an agency also at the level of these wholes themselves. I will attempt to distinguish this position particularly from that of structural Marxism, I will argue that human agency determines the fates of these "organic wholes".

I will conclude the essay with a summary of the sketch of historical materialism, and a summary/concluding remarks on my arguments as to why historical materialism is a fruitful area to study further.

The divisions between the sections will not be absolute, as the sections are not merely limited to elaborations on the matters of their titles but also progressively build up to one another.

2. History and materialism

When attempting to understand historical materialism, already at first appearance we note that this theory is committed to materialism but with a 'historical' component. What exactly does this mean? And what kind of materialism is historical materialism trying to distance itself from". Traditionally, many have understood historical materialism to oppose something called "idealism" on the one hand, and some "vulgar materialism" on the other. But what is "idealism", and what is "materialism"? What is the relationship between the two? And what is the difference between the non-dialectical or non-historical forms of these, and their apparently historical or dialectical forms? A classic scheme is that Hegel espoused an "idealistic" conception of history and dialectics, Marx of course turned him upside down and espoused a "materialistic" conception of history and dialectics, creating a materialism that was distinct from the previously non-dialectical, or metaphysical materialism.² This

² See Friedrich Engels, "General" in "Introduction", *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, trans. Emile Burns (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1947),
URL=<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/>>

formulation has its roots in famous remarks of Marx himself at the afterword to the *Capital* and has been theorised in length by those like Engels within Marx's lifetime (in such works as *Anti-Dühring*) and beyond (in such works as Ludwig Feuerbach and *the End of Classical German Philosophy*). Marx and Engels have also, less famously, expressed themselves against "hitherto existing" forms of "materialism", apparently incompatible with "dialectics".³

These questions are important to answer to make any sense of what the theory actually says about the determinants of historical social development, and as I will hopefully demonstrate, is central to answering how historical materialism conceives agency. For this I will attempt to give a general sketch of "idealism" (in section 2.1) and "materialism" (in section 2.2) as these concepts may relate to *historical* materialism, which I will conclude by elaborating (in section 2.3).

2.1 Idealism and Hegel

In the foreword to his translation of *Grundrisse*, whilst explaining the relationship between Hegel and Marx, Martin Nicolaus writes "[t]he idealist side of his philosophy was that he denied the reality of what the senses perceive".⁴ According to him, Hegel started from "recogniz[ing] that there are senses and that they do perceive something", pointing therefrom that "these perceptions by themselves can grasp only the appearance of things, not their truth".⁵ There is something that shines forth, which the senses perceive, but the "essence" of things can only be figured out "through the criticism and reconstruction of sense-perceptions by logical reasoning."⁶ From this "correct principle" according to Nicolaus "Hegel drew the false conclusion that only the logical concepts worked up by the mind have any reality."⁷ The concept of *Geist*, as Nicolaus understands it, is some bodyless "mind", a mystical displacement of mental capacities, from which according to him it is only "only a natural step from there to the thesis that this 'objective' but immaterial 'Subject' governed the development of the world".⁸

So, according to this scheme what makes Hegel an "idealist" is to take mental refinements of a sensuous world to be the "real", instead of conceding that there is a world to be sensed at all. This conception of "idealism", especially with regards to Hegel and within the historical materialist tradition, is hardly anything new. It is not hard to read Marx's famous (albeit short) remarks in the Afterword to the Second German Edition in a similar way: "My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life

³ See for example Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Marx/Engels Selected Works* vol. 1, trans. W. Lough, 13-15 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), thesis 1, URL=<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>> and Engels, *Anti-Dühring* in "Introduction" – with regards to "French materialism", "mechanical materialism", etc.

⁴ Martin Nicolaus, foreword to *Grundrisse*, by Karl Marx (London: Pelican Books, 1973 – Penguin Books, 1993), 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of “the Idea,” he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea.” With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.”⁹ In Engels however we get a much clearer and more straightforward scheme that resembles Nicolaus’, in such works as *Anti-Dühring*, where Engels sketches the entire history of philosophy, and very concisely in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. What is potentially different in Engels’ scheme is the question of precedence in causation, as opposed to just rejection of the material world, as he writes in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*:

Thus the question of the relation of thinking to being, the relation of the spirit to nature — the paramount question of the whole of philosophy [...] the question: which is primary, spirit or nature — that question, in relation to the church, was sharpened into this: Did God create the world or has the world been in existence eternally?¹⁰

The impression we get here is that “idealism” is the opinion that “thinking” precedes “being”, whereas “materialism” is the opinion that “being” precedes “thinking”. It must be noted that this conceptualisation does not encapsulate the diversity of Engels’ writing, but it is illustrative of a particular way of conceptualising the relationship between “idealism” and “materialism”. This conception (excepting its particular claims, say, with regards to cosmology) seems to be not so contradictory with, for example, criticism of the Young Hegelians that Marx presents in *The German Ideology*. This scheme of the relationship between Hegel’s theory and historical materialism reflects the view that what Marx inherited from Hegel was essentially the “methodology of Hegel” or the “dialectic”. “Materialism” thus means the inversion of “idealism”, that the “sensuous world” is the one that is real.¹¹ However, as young Lenin’s controversy with the Machists¹² demonstrates, what is understood by this “sensuous world” is not uniform even amongst the adherents of this view. I will come back to this issue in section 2.2.

It is worth questioning in the first place how fair a conception of Hegel’s works this scheme is. Many have criticised this “inversion” view, emphasising instead the continuity between

⁹ Karl Marx, afterword to the second German edition, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers), URL = <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p3.htm>>. Whence also the relevant famous quote: “The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.”

¹⁰ Friedrich Engels, “Materialism” in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1946), URL=<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/>>

¹¹ I will henceforth refer to this view as the “inversion” view.

¹² This “Machist” controversy will be explained in greater detail in section 2.2, the most well-known work from the “Machist” controversy is Vladimir I. Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy” in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 14, trans. Abraham Fineberg (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing, 1962), 17-362.

Hegel and Marx. One expression of this has been the Hegelian Marxist tradition, counting amongst its ranks (from time to time) even those like old Lenin,¹³ György Lukács,¹⁴ etc., but clearly expressed in the works of those like Raya Dunayevskaya. As an example, whilst Dunayevskaya's conception of the relationship between Hegel and Marx is not all that different from the "inversion" view on paper – she criticises Hegel's "exclusive concern with ideas and thoughts, and his solving of all contradictions in thought alone"¹⁵ – however, the word she uses is *concern*, rather than something implying metaphysical exclusion of some "sensuous world".¹⁶ This "inversion"-conception of Hegel has been criticised also by non-Marxists, both those with a positive conception of Marx and a negative conception of Marx.

An example to a criticism of this "inversion" view by someone with a positive conception of Marx, but is nonetheless explicitly a non-Marxist, is the one put forward by Tom Rockmore. Rockmore separates the "analytic" conception of "idealism" as meaning "a supposed doubt about the existence of the external world" (the one that I identified as the "inversion" view) and another historical concept of idealism that originates with Kant and "lies in the claim [...] that a condition of knowledge is that we in some sense produce, or construct, what we know."¹⁷ In this sense, Rockmore contends, "Marx is clearly an idealist" arguing that: "There is no evidence that Marx's position depends on any specific claim about matter. If we accepted the interpretation of his position as materialism, then his so-called materialism would not be incompatible with, but merely a further form of, German idealism."¹⁸ In discussing various kinds of "materialism"s that focus on the primacy of "sensuous world", in section 2.2, I will follow up on this claim of Rockmore. I will also take up the theme that "a condition of knowledge is that we [...] produce, or construct, what we know" on section 2.3 and later on this section.

A problem that Rockmore's explanation leaves us with however, if one should accept it, what Marx's "materialism" in that case should mean, and how exactly is the Marxian position different from the Hegelian one. A solution would be to say that there is no difference, in which case one would need to reconstruct what the Hegelian position might be, this solution is not enough for me since I do think there is a value in this distinction, and in the term

¹³ For this view on the older Lenin one can see Tom Rockmore, *Marx after Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx* (Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 15-16, or J. M. Fritzman, *Hegel* (Cornwall: Polity Press, 2014), 146. An even more detailed argument for this view can be found in Kevin B. Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (Haymarket Books, 2023).

¹⁴ A more detailed discussion of Lukács' relation to "Hegelian" Marxism can be found in Anderson, "Lenin and Hegel in Central Europe: Korsch, Lukács, and Bloch", chap. 7, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*.

¹⁵ Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and freedom from 1776 until Today*, 4th edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 57.

¹⁶ Dunayevskaya is broadly critical of the way in which the concept of "idealism" is used in Marxist discourse to suppress – what is in fact, according to her – the dialectical method itself, as seen in Dunayevskaya, 62. She praises for example that Lenin "felt compelled to break with his former conception of the relationship between materialism and idealism", and positively conceives "the keynote" of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* as "nothing short of a restoration of truth to philosophic idealism against vulgar materialism" in Dunayevskaya, 171.

¹⁷ Rockmore, 70.

¹⁸ Ibid.

“historical materialism”. I will suggest another solution throughout the sections 2.2 and 2.3, for this section however it may be valuable to elaborate what “idealism” and the Hegelian position might be.

The conception of “idealism” as represented by Nicolaus, at least with regards to Hegel, is the rejection of a world external to the senses or to cognition. Central to this conception, I think, is a dualism between world-as-cognised, mental states, sensuousness and a world external to these senses/mental states. I will discuss the implications this has for a conception of materialism on section 2.2, which will be connected to Marx and views on agency through section 2.3 into section 3, the question is however is if there is a way to understand Hegel’s conception without maintaining such a dualism. Rockmore, as I have already mentioned, proposes the definition of idealism as lying “in the claim [...] that a condition of knowledge is that we in some sense produce, or construct, what we know.”¹⁹ This idea about apperception, and an interpretation of Hegel’s idealism on this basis is not unheard of. Rather prominently in fact this view of “non-metaphysical Hegelianism” is represented by philosophers like Robert B. Pippin²⁰, Terry Pinkard²¹ and so on. Without derailing the essay, what can be noted here is that it is possible to read Hegel as essentially a post-Kantian categorial philosopher, whose philosophical project is (at least most fruitfully) understood as a conceptualisation of the ways in which some subject appropriates the world (producing knowledge), saying that this appropriation involves some apperceptive principle which means the appropriation of knowledge does not happen through Humean, or in any case directly empirical, means.²² This has presumably implications for metaphysics, as it may mean the rejection of metaphysical realism (hence the interpretation being “non-metaphysical”), but significantly Hegel (even if we read him as a post-Kantian idealist) is not Kant, and he “rejects Kant’s ‘thing-in-itself’ skepticism, and so proposes to “overcome” any presumed realist/antirealist opposition.”²³ This proposed overcoming of the “realist/antirealist opposition” has serious implications for a nuanced appreciation of the entirety of the Hegelian project,²⁴ for now it should do to at least point out one way in which “inversion” conceptions of the Hegelian or even the idealist project struggles to be a sufficient framework to understand the “materialism” part of historical materialism, and that the Hegelian project need not be interpreted (at least exclusively) within a dualistic

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For example, in Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²¹ For example, in Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: A Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

²² Which, significantly, is not a rejection of the empirical-as-such, but a rejection of some kind of empiricism. As Pippin puts it in an endnote to *Hegel’s Idealism*, on page 262, the point is “to deny the fundamentality or ultimacy of empirical knowledge”, which he identifies as denying also “a ‘naturalist’ or ‘materialist’ explanation”. This is some of the hardship presented by concepts like “idealism”, “materialism”, etc. that they are utilised in so many different ways, but the remark by Pippin there is besides the point being made here.

²³ Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism*, 262 (endnote).

²⁴ Just to remark, I do not agree with a hard non-metaphysical interpretation of the Hegelian project, but following the argument here does not depend on accepting such an interpretation – it suffices to concede that the Hegelian project need not be interpreted in a hard/classic metaphysical manner.

framework. I will take up this thread again at the end of section 2.2, to see how such an idealism may interact with materialism.

2.2 Materialism or “hitherto existing materialism”

In section 2.1 I elaborated on a particular view on the relationship between "materialism" and "idealism" that conceives of the "materialistic" part of "historical materialism" as essentially an inversion of this "idealism's" supposed claims on the relationship between "matter" (or “being”) and "mental states" (“thinking”). Materialism, according to this scheme, advocates the primacy of “being” over “thinking”. Views of the early Marxist revisionist²⁵ Eduard Bernstein, who identified “materialism” in a similar way and was critical of this conception, can be demonstrative of the various problems of such a view with regards to, amongst other things, human agency. He writes in *Evolutionary Socialism* that “The question of the correctness of the materialist interpretation of history is the question of the determining causes of historic necessity.”²⁶ The entire question on materialism is deeply connected to the question of determination and of agency, Bernstein argues: “To be a materialist means first of all to trace back all phenomena to the necessary movements of matter [...] It is, finally, always the movement of matter which determines the form of ideas and the directions of the will; and thus these also (and with them everything that happens in the world of humanity) are inevitable.”²⁷

But do these problems actually plague the materialism of *historical* materialism as Bernstein argues? The purpose of this section is to attempt to figure that out, by going through some examples of such a conception of materialism, seeing if it carries the aforementioned and similar problems, and trying to find out if this materialism is reflective of historical materialism, and if not what sort of alternatives could be found.

In section 2.1 I had noted how different adherents of the relationship between “idealism” and “materialism” found in the “inversion” view, had different conceptions of “the sensuous world” being real, using the “Machist” controversy as example. In that controversy, on the one hand, there is the “Machist” view, that our “experiences of the world” and the “world itself” are not two separate things, that there is no “substance” akin to matter that is being experienced, but rather the sensuousness itself is the world. As later empiricist Pannekoek explains, Ernst Mach, and by proxy Machists, argue that “The object is the sum total of all sensations at different times that, through a certain constancy of place and surroundings considered as related, are combined and denoted by a name. It is no more; there is no

²⁵ “Revisionism” in the context of Marxist discourse refers to the revision of various tenets conceived to be central to Marxism, this term found derogatory use amongst the opponents of reformist theories advocated by Bernstein, here it is used merely as a descriptor, as Bernstein himself also identified with the term, as demonstrated by, for example, Eduard Bernstein, preface to English edition of *Evolutionary Socialism*, trans. Edith C. Harvey (Independent Labour Party, 1907), URL = <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bernstein/works/1899/evsoc/>.

²⁶ Bernstein, “(b) The Materialist Interpretation of History and Historic Necessity”

²⁷ Ibid.

reason to assume with Kant a ‘Thing-in-itself’ (Ding an sich) beyond this sensation–mass; we cannot even express in words what we would have to think of it. So the object is formed entirely by sensations; it consists merely of sensations”²⁸, thereby they accused their opponents of being Kantians and vulgar materialists, supposedly upholding the existence of two substances, a mental substance and a material substance.²⁹

The opponents of Machism – significantly, younger Lenin in 1908 – argue that Machists essentially end up with a position akin to that of Hume or of a Berkeleyan idealism. They argue that instead of criticising Kant for being an idealist, the Machists criticise him for being a realist, they “criticise him from the Right” and not from “the Left”.³⁰ According to them, the problem with Machism is that it essentially deflates the world into sensuousness and cannot coherently make sense of “laws of nature” independently of the mind enforcing themselves on humans, even when they are not aware of those laws.³¹ They defend themselves from the claim that they espouse a “Kantian” or “dualist” philosophy by arguing that there is no “mental” substance, the mental is simply an aspect of the movement of the “material”. Mental states, thus, are continuous (or at least contiguous) with the world, they are impressions by various machinations (the world outside of our brains) upon various mechanisms (our brains). Our mental states are not symbolic mediators of “objects” and the connections between them in an “external” world, but rather direct results of those objects and the connections between them.³² This “copy” theory, as Lance Byron Richey notes³³, does not reject the possible imperfection of these impressions³⁴, but points to human practice as affirming the correlation of our mental states to the “outside” world. As Lenin,

²⁸ Anton Pannekoek, *Lenin as philosopher: a critical examination of the philosophical basis of Leninism*, revised edition, ed. Lance Byron Richey (Marquette University Press, 2003), 102. Pannekoek, apparently, does not entirely agree with Mach, finding his views unclear on some points and disagreeing with some of the words that Mach chooses to express his views, such as “sensations”, preferring instead words like “phenomena”. There is a nuanced difference, where it is important for Pannekoek to not reduce “phenomena” to subjective experience, regardless it is not entirely clear what difference this makes in practice. This discussion finds itself in a footnote because it is not entirely relevant to the subject matter, as further reading the Editor’s Introduction by Lance Byron Richey to the cited edition of *Lenin as Philosopher* might be of interest.

²⁹ See the overview of the accusations of Kantianism by Lenin, “The Criticism of Kantianism from the Left and the Right” in “Materialism and Empirio-criticism”, 194-205. For an overview from the other side, see Pannekoek’s analysis of the controversy in *Lenin as philosopher*, 121-162, specifically the subsection on “Materialism” under “Lenin”, 136-143.

³⁰ Lenin, “The Criticism of Kantianism from the Left and the Right” in “Materialism and Empirio-criticism”, 194-205.

³¹ See for example Lenin, “Freedom and Necessity” in “Materialism and Empirio-criticism” (chap. 3, sec. 6), 187-193.

³² Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism” (chap. 1, sec. 1), see for example the quote: “The sophism of idealist philosophy consists in the fact that it regards sensation as being not the connection between consciousness and the external world, but a fence, a wall, separating consciousness from the external world—not an image of the external phenomenon corresponding to the sensation, but as the ‘sole entity.’”, on page 51.

³³ In Lance Byron Richey, editor’s introduction “Pannekoek, Lenin and the Future of Marxist Philosophy” to *Lenin as philosopher*.

³⁴ Richey, 46.

commenting on Engels, writes “all living human practice permeates the theory of knowledge itself and provides an *objective* criterion of truth.”³⁵

But does not this view of materialism fall into the problem of negating human will described by Bernstein at the beginning of this section? Solution to this problem according to Lenin has to do with making sense of the relationship between agency, mental appropriation of the world, and practice, continuing directly from the previous quote he writes:

For until we know a law of nature, it, existing and acting independently and outside our mind, makes us slaves of “blind necessity.” But once we come to know this law, which acts (as Marx pointed out a thousand times) independently of our will and our mind, we become the masters of nature. The mastery of nature manifested in human practice is a result of an objectively correct reflection within the human head of the phenomena and processes of nature, and is proof of the fact that this reflection (within the limits of what is revealed by practice) is objective, absolute, and eternal truth.³⁶

As such, the correctness of our mental appropriation of the world is demonstrated by our mastery over nature which appears (in this instance) as external and distinct to us. The theory of “freedom” or agency here is a limited one that is implicitly grounded from a human framework, thus the point of mechanical determination is not even brought up. In my opinion this point about “human practice”, or at least emphasis on it, brings us to a point that is much more relevant for historical materialism than much of the points brought up in the Machist controversy (including those points brought up by Lenin himself). In its entirety however, this “copy theory” is bogged down by touching too many philosophical minefields. To me it appears that the significant problem here is the framing of the issue in the terms of the “inversion” view in the first place, materialism in this context is a claim about the primacy of some world beyond mental capacities over those mental capacities, Lenin explicitly puts it that way himself: “Materialism, in full agreement with natural science, takes matter as primary and regards consciousness, thought, sensation as secondary.”³⁷ The purpose here is likely, as Richey identifies, “to remove any ground for systematically raising skeptical objections against our knowledge-claims” in confrontation “with the possibility of a radical relativism (under the guise of Machist idealism or scientific conventionalism) which would call into question the scientific character of Marxism”.³⁸ Regardless and despite the insistence on the *continuity* between the “mental” and the “material”, this scheme ends up having to separate the two, reducing the either one into the other. In this process, it faces the problems faced by many similar schemes before, such as having to convert one into the other, or having to explain one with the other (a problem shared by the Machists in the opposite direction). Practice in this scheme is “an objective criterion of truth”, tying together

³⁵ Lenin, “Materialism and Empirio-criticism”, 190.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid. 46.

³⁸ Richey, 47.

these two worlds (which as Richey notes³⁹ is a step in the right direction, in the context of the discourse younger Lenin finds himself in), but the conceptual apparatus of the theory is too dependent on these two worlds where one of these words is explicitly underprioritized or deflated into the other.⁴⁰ To quote Marx, “[h]ence, in contradistinction to [this sort of] materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.”⁴¹

That I am able to quote Marx positively in this context should indicate that I think Marx has a much better solution.⁴² I had taken up two points by Tom Rockmore in section 2.1. One of those points was that “a condition of knowledge is that we in some sense produce, or construct, what we know”, the other was that “[t]here is no evidence that Marx’s position depends on any specific claim about matter.”⁴³

An interesting thing to note here is a certain correspondence between younger Lenin’s project in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, in rejecting metaphysical impositions based on empiricist schemes, and the idealist criticism of empiricism on the basis of the apperceptive principle.⁴⁴ A thorough investigation of this correlation could derail the essay, especially considering that younger Lenin’s “copy” theory seems to be the exact opposite of the apperceptive principle. However, as I implied earlier, I find more interesting to focus the possibilities presented by “practicality” to resolve this dilemma, thus circumventing the issue

³⁹ Richey, 45, 51 – especially the comparison with Heidegger and Husserl is interesting.

⁴⁰ An entire bachelor’s thesis could have been dedicated exclusively to the Machist controversy, which is partially the reason why I thought it was a relatively nuanced example of the problems with the sort of interpretation of “materialism” in the context of historical materialism that I was dealing with here. Regardless, I think it is necessary to go over some issues. A lot of the Machist controversy in fact relates, as L. B. Richey puts it in his introduction (on p. 10), to the “decay of positivism from the 1850s onwards”, significantly to the relationship between an empiricist epistemology and a realist (or, in a sense, materialist) ontology. Thus, as may already be clear, to theories of philosophy of science (and the developments of science itself throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries). This makes an appreciation of the controversy very hard particularly within the constraints of my presentation, and glosses over some significant nuances. I do not think however it noticeably reduces the argumentative strength of my main point, if I had the time and space, I would attempt an elaboration of a more metaphysical engagement with the points raised by the Machist controversy. The point however is precisely that this sort of metaphysical engagement with the subject distracts from the brunt of Marxian critique of both idealism (in the post-Hegel environment) and “hitherto existing materialism”.

⁴¹ Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”, thesis I.

⁴² A solution that I think in large part an older Lenin would agree with, writing in his *Conspectus on Hegel’s Science of Logic* that “Man’s consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it”. Vladimir I. Lenin, “Conspectus of Hegel’s book *The Science of Logic*” in *Collected Works*, 4th edition, trans. Clemence Dutt (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), vol. 38, 85-241, URL = <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/cons-logic/index.htm>>, under Logic, vol. V. “Section Three: Idea. Chapter I. Life.” This is an example that I took up mainly because of syntactical parallels with Rockmore’s definition of idealism, for a more thoroughgoing analysis of old Lenin one can check, as mentioned before, Kevin B. Anderson’s *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*. This does not indicate that I completely agree with Anderson’s evaluation of Lenin, or his analysis as a whole, but I think some of the analysis points towards similar directions.

⁴³ Rockmore, 70.

⁴⁴ As briefly elaborated at the end of section 2.1.

brought about by “any specific claim about matter.” The question then is, how much is it possible to interpret Marx’s project in such a manner?

2.3 Marx and Historical Materialism

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.⁴⁵

In the previous section I discussed an “inversion” view on “materialism” primarily focused on the primacy of the “material” over some “mental” or “ideal”. I suggested at the end of that section that such a focus has problems associated with the philosophy of mind more broadly (such as explaining the “mental” with the “material” or vice versa), and has problems associated with human agency, that is to say – as will be relevant to the entire argument of this section – the “sensuous human activity” disappears in such a scheme. However, if we reject such a primacy of the “material” over the “mental”, what is left of Marx’s theory?

It is common to interpret historical materialism essentially as some form of argument that “economic” factors, or some “base” is the most relevant for explaining the various historical developments of societies. In order to present the different ways to understand this argument I need to present a broader outline of the argument itself. Marx’s own summary of “the guiding principle of [his] studies” in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* is especially useful:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production [*Produktionsverhältnisse*] appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production [*Produktivkräfte*]. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation [*Basis*], on which arises a legal and political superstructure [*Überbau*] and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production [*Produktionsweise*] 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

⁴⁵ Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”, thesis I.

in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.⁴⁶

Here we see Marx spell out very clearly a theory of social/historical development based on a conflict between the forces of production and the relations of production. Forces of production describe the capacities a society has to produce and reproduce its means of life. The relations of production describe the relations in which humans enter inevitably in the continuation of their life. Whilst forces of production develop – perhaps assumed as a consequence of some natural progress of “technology”, a point that I will come to later – they come into conflict with the relations of production that are already constituted, undermining the stability of those relations, come into contradiction with the development of those productive forces. This leads to “an era of social revolution”. In this whole scheme, these explicitly economic foundations are the real basis of the “consciousness of men”, which is identified with “a legal and political superstructure”.

Even more explicitly with regards to the relationship between this “economic basis” and “legal and political superstructure” Marx writes, continuing from the previously quoted passage, that “it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science,” on the one hand and “the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic” expressions on the other.⁴⁷ These expressions, Marx writes, are the “ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.”⁴⁸

The argument here seems to be about the primacy of a material sphere (the base) and a conscious (ideal?), legal- and political sphere (the superstructure). A presentation of Marx’s theory that is quite typical, seemingly being affirmed in its authenticity by these passages. It is no surprise that G. A. Cohen’s famous analytical⁴⁹ account of Marx’s theory starts by quoting these passages.⁵⁰ It would be too complicated to engage with all of Cohen’s arguments, and it should be noted that Cohen contends, quoting Lenin, that he “do[es] not need to be advised that history is 'always richer in content, more varied, more many-sided, more lively and "subtle"' than any theory will represent it as being.”⁵¹ Regardless, some of his elaborations of this scheme are relevant to understanding various problems with the theory

⁴⁶ Karl Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), URL = <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/index.htm>>. The German originals of the concepts used are added by me, as found in Karl Marx, preface to “Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie” in *Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels – Werke*, vol. 13 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1971), URL = <http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me13/me13_003.htm>.

⁴⁷ Karl Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ In his own terms, see Gerald Allan Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence, Expanded Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), ix.

⁵⁰ Ibid. vii-viii. Cohen’s analysis of Marx’s theory does not fully coincide with the implications of the preceding “simple” interpretation. Cohen’s argument makes a hard separation between “forces of production” and “relations of production”, and as such distinguishes between “material” and “economic”, equating instead the “economic” to “social”.

⁵¹ Ibid. ix.

at hand. Cohen defines the forces of production as consisting of; (A) the instruments of production, (B) raw materials – where (A) and (B) together constitute the “means of production” – and (C) labour power, “that is, the productive faculties of producing agents: strength, skill, knowledge, inventiveness, etc.”⁵² Relevantly, he argues that it “is wrong to infer that [appropriate laws, morals, and government] can [...] be treated as means of production” since “A means of Φ -ing is something used in order to Φ . Laws, morals, and government are not used by men to produce products. When they are used, as they may be, to get men to produce, they are means not of production but of motivating producers.”⁵³

Thus, in this conception of Marx’s theory of history, the driving force of history⁵⁴ is some “productive forces” that are understood distinctly as technology (as a linearly “increasing” or “decreasing” quantity) – which can be understood as technical capacity (also as a quantity) and machinery – and raw materials.⁵⁵ These, including what I termed “technology”, fall into the “material” side of the important “material” vs. “social” (wherein “economy” as a whole is also included for Cohen) distinction that Cohen draws.⁵⁶ Thus “materialism” of Marx in this analysis ends up as the primacy of these “material” factors and their autonomous development, this very much in correspondence with the “inversion” view that I previously elaborated.⁵⁷ It is hard to see how one can avoid describing this theory as a kind of technological determinism. This is noted by Cohen himself who responds by suggesting that this is not necessarily a negative thing, though he does not take up the issue of “determinism”⁵⁸ in length, he indicates that future developments predicted by this interpretation of historical materialism “are inevitable not despite what men may do, but because of what men, being rational, are bound, predictably, to do.”⁵⁹ Regarding the issue of technology, he brings up the important point that there is an “extensive coincidence in fact and in Marx’s perception between the development of the productive forces and the growth of human faculties” as such the development of forces of production is at its core “an enrichment of human labour power” and thus “development of productive power is an advance in the ‘mode of self-activity of individuals’” which “proceeds in tandem with a

⁵² Ibid. 32

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ As Cohen insists or implies repeated, see for example how he defines his project as defence of “a traditional conception,” of historical materialism “in which history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth” in Cohen, x.

⁵⁵ Of course, Cohen’s explication or interpretation of Marx’s theory is much more complicated than the description given here and has many other aspects. But for reasons that I hope will become clear, this is the aspect of his work that I focus on.

⁵⁶ Cohen, 88 – and the entirety of chap. IV following it.

⁵⁷ This is something that Allen Wood counts amongst Marx’s postulates, see Allen Wood, 101. Though the point is by no means that Cohen’s theory and Allen Wood’s theory are the same, he regards the important point in Marx’s theory of history as being the supremacy of *economic*, basic tendencies, over superstructural tendencies, in a “teleological” development, see Allen Wood, 110.

⁵⁸ At least in the context of *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*.

⁵⁹ Footnote 1 on Cohen, 147.

‘development of men’.”⁶⁰ I think this is a valid counterargument to the idea that these technological theories do not reduce the relevance of humanity in human history.

It is nonetheless feasible that these theories could be fruitful or “correct” interpretations of Marx’s theory of history, while also being “demeaning to humanity”⁶¹. But is it a fruitful or “correct” interpretation of Marx’s theory of society and history? Before attempting to answer this question, one must acknowledge that Marx changed his mind frequently, constantly developing his theories and his conception of those theories, and the same theories were represented differently in different works of his aimed at different audiences. As Allen Wood notes in the introduction to his book on Marx, “anyone who desires to expound the philosophy of Marx is virtually compelled to attempt the task of reconstructing a coherent philosophy on the basis of fragments not meant for publication and *obiter dicta* written in the course of other investigations.” Whether or not Cohen’s and similar interpretations offer the *most* fruitful appreciation of the works of Marx, I think at least some of his descriptions authentically describe some features of (or fair inferences from) Marx’s theories. Alas, I also think that Cohen’s project and similar interpretations end up reducing the complexity and sophistication of Marx’s theories in ways that actually reduce their usefulness, in pursuit of a “clear and concise” presentation.

In inversion of this, my exposition may suffer in parts from lacking clarity, I will attempt to reduce this, but my interpretation of Marx here (as it did so far) will mostly focus on trying to point at the direction of further study, rather than being (sufficiently) the study material itself.

I presented the implications of the “inversion” view (or views that accord to it) as being essentially a “technological determinism”. I think there are several problems with this framework, some of them can already be introduced through this conception. The problematic aspect with “technological determinism” is not that it is demeaning for humans, or in any case other such judgements based upon values that we (are at least expected to) hold, but rather its ability to conceive and relate to human practice. Cohen’s framework does conceive of technological development as essentially about human development or as “an advance in the ‘mode of self-activity of individuals’” in the abstract, but how it coincides with actual empirical appreciation of the world (and actual human activity) is unclear. Especially so if we conceive historical materialism as a theory that should be particularly informative about the formation of political action with the purpose of enacting changes upon society or navigating those changes. Cohen’s framework, and similar frameworks that conceptualise the “material” “base” in ways that autonomously develop as distinct from the “superstructure” and actual history. As Ellen Meiksins Wood puts it,⁶² Cohen’s interpretation and similar

⁶⁰ Cohen, 147. I tried to preserve this nuance in my explanation of “technology” in the context of Cohen’s theory with the inclusion of “technical capacity”.

⁶¹ Cohen, 147.

⁶² In the context of responding to the critics of E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, including amongst other Cohen specifically.

interpretations fall into a “view that theoretical knowledge – the knowledge of structures – is a matter of 'static conceptual representation', while motion and flux (together with history) belong to a different, empirical sphere of cognition”, which as she criticises, is a view that is unable to deal with analysis of *history*, or actual historical work. The purely “structural” models of class society, or “inversion” views that conceive of class society as essentially the primacy of a “material” base over a non-material “superstructure” are unable to respond to the criticisms coming from non-Marxists with regards to identifying class under historical circumstances where “class-for-itself” (or in any case explicit organisational and cultural presence in terms of class) are not to be found.⁶³

To get a better sense of the argument here it is necessary to provide an understanding of “materialism” that can be meaningfully “materialistic” while still being *historical* – that is to say, explicitly relating to actual history, sensuous human activity. As a starting point that I think is useful for such an elaboration of history, Engels in *Anti-Dühring* identifies the “materialistic treatment of history” as “explaining man's ‘knowing’ by his ‘being’, instead of, as heretofore, his ‘being’ by his ‘knowing’.”⁶⁴ To translate it another way, explaining the human consciousness by their being, rather than explaining their being by their consciousness. In *The German Ideology*, Marx explains his choice of explanatory starting point in the following way:

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 actual material life.

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.⁶⁵

⁶³ Meiksins Wood, 83.

⁶⁴ Engels, “General” in “Introduction”, *Anti-Dühring*.

⁶⁵ The original quote from Karl Marx, in “First Premises of Materialist Method” in “Part I: Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook”, *The German Ideology: Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to Its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets* (1932), as extracted from URL = <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/index.htm>>.

The word here that is translated as “expression” is “äußern”, a key sentence here is the that “As individuals express their life, so they are” which in the German original is “Wie die Individuen ihr Leben äußern, so sind sie.”⁶⁶ The entire argument here follows from an earlier argument found in “Estranged Labour” (from *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*):

The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life activity*. Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species-being. Or it is only because he is a species-being that he is a conscious being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity.

[...]

In creating a *world of objects* by his personal activity, in his *work upon* inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species-being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as his own essential being, or that treats itself as a species-being.⁶⁷

No point here in following the argument about species being to its end, as that would seriously derail the elaboration.⁶⁸ The point however is that Marx has a scheme in which “consciousness” is made one, or a direct continuation/consequence of human life activity. Which gets us back to the introduction of this section of the essay itself:

⁶⁶ The German version as provided in Karl Marx, under “A. Die Ideologie überhaupt, namentlich die deutsche” in “I. Feuerbach: Gegensatz von materialistischer und idealistischer Anschauung”, in “Die deutsche Ideologie”, *Karl Marx - Friedrich Engels – Werke*, vol. 3 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1969), 5- 530. As extracted from URL = <http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me03/me03_009.htm>. This citation is in part to draw attention at the verb Marx uses in the original, which relates to the larger argument of *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and possibly to various Hegelian themes discussed, amongst other places, in section 2.1. Not much more can be written in the main body of the text without derailing the argument.

⁶⁷ Karl Marx, “Estranged Labour”, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959). As extracted from URL = <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm>>. Rest of the passage is actually also relevant to the essay, but I had to take it out from the body of the text: “Admittedly animals also produce. [...] But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom. An animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature. An animal’s product belongs immediately to its physical body, whilst man freely confronts his product. An animal forms only in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty.”

⁶⁸ To quickly sketch out what is tangentially relevant to the essay: The argument about species being follows closely Hegel’s in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in my understanding, about the development of appreciation of the world (by “consciousness”, “self-consciousness”, and so forth in this development). Marx makes the appropriation of the world by actual practice the condition/actualisation of this development of consciousness.

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.⁶⁹

At the core of Marx's theory then is not the supremacy of the "material" or "economic" as understood in a way decoupled from sensuous human activity, practice (for example in terms of abstract schemata relating to technical knowledge, or "raw material" and "machinery" in a way as causally preceding sensuous human activity), but rather "material" and "economic" as denoting human social existence, as is/becomes. Of course, "ideology", or "conscious being" is a part of that human social existence, and is framed as Marx and Engels as being determined by this social existence but the point they make is about what to take as one's "basis" when trying to explain historical and social phenomena. "Ideology" and "conscious being" in a certain sense shines forth from human social existence, in terms of legal and political forms *understood* "in a distinct sphere", that is not the same as saying (or should not be the same as saying) that they *are*, in fact, at their core a separate and distinct sphere (with ontological implications at its most dangerous) that is being determined by this "material" and "economic" sphere that can presumably be understood by these abstract schemata.⁷⁰ The problem lies not just in how these schemes conceive "ideology" and "conscious being", but how these schemes conceive the "material" and "economic", as essentially "technical" or with regards specifically to the "material" as being driven by the "technical" side of the "productive forces" as clearly separable from the "relations of production" and all that is "superstructural" – as G. A. Cohen insists explicitly at doing, and as many instinctively do.

Consider for example Marx's analysis of "production" in the introduction to *Grundrisse*, in particular (for example) that "[a] railway on which no trains run, hence which is not used up, not consumed, is a railway only δυνάμει, and not in reality."⁷¹ As Ellen Meiksins Wood writes in *Democracy against capitalism*, defending E. P. Thompson's work *The Making of the English Working Class* from critics such as Cohen, "Marx's concept of social being itself clearly refers not simply to the mode of production as an impersonal 'objective structure' but to the way that people live it"⁷². In fact, the entirety of the argument in pages 96-98 is extremely relevant to the argument being made about the appreciation of "social being" (as "materiality" of historical materialism). Meiksins Wood argues that simply organizational schemata of "relations of production" is insufficient to understand the development of class and class society, and argues that a concept like Thompson's "experience" or "class experience" is a necessary remedy to bridge the gap between the theoretical and the empirical, that historical materialist analysis necessitates the identification of class as existing

⁶⁹ Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach", thesis I.

⁷⁰ See Ellen Meiksins Wood's analysis of the relation between "politics" and "economy" in Meiksins Wood, "1. The separation of the 'economic' and 'political' in capitalism", *Democracy against capitalism*, chap. I, 19-48.

⁷¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 91.

⁷² Meiksins Wood, 97.

meaningfully in reality and not just a theoretical, abstract, concept imposed upon reality. As she writes:

Neither Marx nor Thompson nor anyone else has devised a 'rigorous' theoretical vocabulary to convey the effect of material conditions on conscious, active beings – beings whose conscious activity is itself a material force [...] But it can surely be no part of theoretical rigour to ignore these complexities merely for the sake of conceptual tidiness or a framework of 'structural definitions' which purport to resolve all important historical questions on the theoretical plane.⁷³

Cohen and similar analytical Marxists' (or structuralists') focus on "clear and concise" or "rigorous" argumentation⁷⁴, end up in a place where they conceive of, or emphasise, a "materiality" without human sensuous activity, without Praxis.⁷⁵ This "materiality" serves well schemata that fit well with "those standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth-century analytical philosophy"⁷⁶ something which Marx indeed did not have "the will" to "straighten out".⁷⁷ Cohen is himself aware of Marx and Lenin's warnings against "a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being supra-historical" and history being "always richer in content, more varied, more many-sided, more lively and "subtle" than any theory will represent it as being."⁷⁸ But considers these as "warnings against a certain *misuse* of theory" but that "some Marxists cite them to disguise their own aversion to theory as such".⁷⁹ However as Meiksins Wood remarks, it is not "enough just to concede the existence of these complexities in some other order of reality — in the sphere of history as distinct from the sphere of 'objective structures' — which belongs to a different level of discourse, the 'empirical' in opposition to the 'theoretical'."⁸⁰ The actually existing history, "sensuous human activity", "must somehow be acknowledged by the theoretical framework itself and be embodied in the very notion of 'structure'".⁸¹

Further discussion of the point about "structured process" and structure will take place in section 3, and particularly 3.2, for now it is necessary to formulate my broader suggestion here – some of which will also necessitate the consideration of the elaborations in section 3.1 and 3.2. I think the methodological commitment of historical materialist theory is in significant part to emphasise the coherence of an actually existing, practical world, as opposed to the ways in which it seems to be – especially as it seems to be through ways of conceptualisation that are made into the norm on the basis of social actuality. Through this methodology the theory of historical materialism principally involves the thesis that society

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Following from his own description of his project, again, on Cohen ix.

⁷⁵ The word "Praxis" will be used relatively often throughout the text to essentially refer to "sensuous human activity".

⁷⁶ Cohen, ix.

⁷⁷ An indirect reference again to *ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* The quotations from Marx and Lenin are cited in Cohen's book itself.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Meiksins Wood, 98

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

continuing to exist (as Praxis) implies human appropriation of the world in various ways. In this appropriation that is necessary to produce and reproduce the means of their life, their expression confronts them also as objects. This process that humans find themselves in regardless of their own volition, implies a complex whole,⁸² various arrangements of technic, machinery and human relationships, which historical materialism insists as being relevant and mattering to the course of historical development and the development of social phenomena.⁸³ Historical materialism significantly involves the insistence that this emerging whole, this continuous arrangement of society, implies a pattern of development of its own that, as will hopefully become clear through the argumentation in section 3.1 and 3.2, is not simply reducible to the interactive sum of the patterns of development of its constituent parts. Thus, the ways in which social movements emerge, all “ideological” production and so on, are *characterised* by the pattern of development of their mode of production – a continuing social arrangement, an emerging whole – that is the core assumption of their existing society, not because they are inferior to, but because they develop as predicated by, the mode of production.

3. Agency

In the previous section I discussed what “historical materialism” may mean, both with regards to it being a sort of “materialism”, and with regards to it being a *historical* sort of materialism. In this context I analysed what I termed the “inversion” view of materialism, that conceives “materialism” principally the primacy of “material” factor over “ideal” or “social” or “superstructural” factors. In section 2.1, I approached the problem on the basis of the relationship between “idealism” and “materialism”, particularly the relationship between the theories of Marx and those of Hegel – criticising the “inversion” view’s conception of that relationship. In section 2.2, I looked at examples of “materialism” that I think coincide (more or less) with the “inversion” view, in particular the sides represented in the Machist controversy, where I suggested (or implied) that the impasse of this controversy was caused in part by the “inversion” view’s conceptualisation of materialism – I also indicated some of the problems that this view might have with actual human agency. I used section 2.3 to analyse how Marx’s own statements on the issue can be interpreted, in particular contrasting the interpretation suggested by G. A. Cohen with that of Ellen Meiksins Wood, arguing that Cohen’s interpretation – which I argued more or less corresponds to the general scheme of the “inversion” view – fails at appreciating various central insights of Marx’s theories due to a sort of separation between abstract, structural analysis and an apparently contingent or

⁸² The arguments for the explanatory possibility for which will be later introduced in section 3.1 and 3.2, in connection to

⁸³ A longer argument about this is made in György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, writing that “It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality.” in Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, centenary edition, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso Books, 2023), 27. The entire following chapter is relevant to the discussion, but importantly, I suggest a weaker “thesis”;

empirical historical process. In particular, I pointed out that this interpretation seems to suffer from relating to, or informing, political action – hence, this section on agency.

I indicated at the end of section 2.3 that I think Ellen Meiksins Wood and such an interpretation of the Marxian theory points at the direction of a solution. In this section I will attempt to elaborate such a solution, building also further upon significantly the rest of section 2.3, primarily what sort of implications a truly *historical*(ly) materialist theory might have about agency, and how this compares to alternative theories.

3.1 Structuralism and methodological individualism

In some capacity, particularly at the end of section 2.3, I have referred to various “structuralists” in a limited capacity. But who are these structuralists? Some – albeit short – discussion is necessary. As already indicated in 2.3, that they are called “structuralists” has something to do with their explanations of class society, which is on the basis (at least in a specifically Althusserian context)⁸⁴ that they consider that there are certain epistemological distinctions between different *sciences*. This comes from their rejection of what they deem to be the “empiricist” idea that subjects can go beyond appearances to grasp something’s essence through observation and abstraction.⁸⁵ Instead according to Althusser, knowledge of the essence of the world is created through a processing of information in thought according to a certain scientific methodology.⁸⁶ This allows them to make distinctions between various spheres that concern different scientific methodologies. Marx, in this framework, is the founder of a particular science, science of history, this science thus is able to speak about the mode of production after a rather deterministic fashion, despite such a determinism not prevailing in the actually existing “social formations”, as these do not reflect necessarily a single mode of production but can bear traces of many of these in various, irreducibly complex manners.⁸⁷

While Althusser and Althusserians did not espouse the thesis that the productive forces are the main driving force of historical development (instead typically arguing in favour of the relations of production), the theoretical ground of “structuralism” represented here overlap significantly with Cohen’s framework.⁸⁸ Some of the problems that I implied in my treatment of Cohen, become rather explicit in the context of Althusser, where actual human actors

⁸⁴ See William Lewis, “Louis Althusser”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/althusser/>>, section 3.2.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid. and Meiksins Wood, 50.

⁸⁸ Cohen obviously has significant disagreements with Althusser and the Althusserians, but the influence is significant enough that it is mentioned and treated repeatedly throughout his work, see for example Cohen, x-xi. The “considerable” “specific doctrinal differences” described with relation to Althusser here seems to be in part some of Althusser’s conception of the indeterminacy of social formations – which is not necessarily something that Cohen would theoretically concede though, despite my and Meiksins Wood’s assertions – and significantly the differing opinions on the driving force of history within the mode of production.

disappear into being simple “‘supports’ of the relations of production”.⁸⁹ With consideration of the problems that I took up in section 2.3 in the context of Cohen, I do not think this interpretation provides an especially fruitful framework for further study.⁹⁰

But what is the alternative? One alternative is to embrace methodological individualism.⁹¹ Methodological individualism seems to *develop* fundamentally from various analytical commitments such as that “a micro-analysis is always desirable and always in principle possible”⁹², that is to say that phenomena that seems structural or “molar” are fundamentally explainable (should be explained) “by reference to the micro-constituents and micro-mechanisms that respectively compose the entities and underlie the processes which occur at a grosser level of resolution.”⁹³

Thus, this perspective comes to “reject the point of view in which social formation and classes are depicted as entities obeying laws of behaviour that are not a function of the behaviours of their constituent parts.”⁹⁴ Due to this rejection of the existence of structures (except as counterfactual statements in some cases, simply due to the scientific underdevelopment of our explanations)⁹⁵ the methodological individualists⁹⁶ argue for a scheme based on the continuous elaboration of the interests and properties of individual agents. This starts with a conception of agency “an agent desires that p, believes that doing x will bring it about that p, and therefore does x”,⁹⁷ within a framework that assumes that “personhood” underlying agency implies such qualities as “rationality”, which is identified as agents being “‘attitudinally rational’, that is ‘disposed at least to change one’s beliefs so as to eliminate counter-examples and inconsistencies’”,⁹⁸ and “‘behaviourally rational’, acting in the light of their beliefs and desires, so that if someone desires that p, believes that doing x will bring it about that p and other things are equal (there are no conflicting desires etc.), then if he or she does not do x, the antecedent, with its ascription of belief and desire and *ceteris paribus* clause,⁹⁹ must be false.”¹⁰⁰ As the last definition suggests, the framework of methodological individualism applies to those cases and phenomena which follow its predictions. Its explanatory power is absolute to the cases which it can (we assume)

⁸⁹ Alex Callinicos, *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), xxi. In Althusser’s theories, there is of course also the aspect of overdetermination, but that does not fix the problem at the level of informing political action. Ellen Meiksins Wood’s discussions of the collapse of structuralism into post-structuralism in Meiksins Wood, 9, 50-64 are especially relevant.

⁹⁰ This is well-trodden territory already, and with limited time and space, both Callinicos’ *Making History* and Meiksins Wood’s *Democracy against capitalism* provide extended discussions.

⁹¹ As Alex Callinicos considers Cohen later in life to have done so, see Callinicos, xxvii, or Cohen’s own discussions of this (as apparently definitional to analytical Marxism) in Cohen, xxii-xxiii.

⁹² Cohen, xxiii.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Callinicos, xxvii.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Including “rational-choice Marxists” as mentioned all throughout Callinicos, i-xliii.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 5.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 6.

⁹⁹ All other things being equal.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 6-7.

successfully be applied, this applicability is in turn demonstrated by whether the case was successfully explained by it. Hence the “methodological” part of “methodological” individualism.¹⁰¹

But, as philosopher Alex Callinicos asks, “Why is it so important to reduce structures to individuals?”¹⁰² He contends that “referring to structures in our explanations” is unproblematic “so long as, as with all explanations, these make empirically testable claims about the mechanisms responsible for the events requiring explanation, and either specify or leave space for the specification of the micro-foundations of these events?”¹⁰³ Callinicos intends to present an alternative view both to these methodologically individualist views, the aforementioned structuralist views, and to those models that “counterpose human agency to the structures of capitalism”, and “[posit] subjectivity as exterior to these relations [of production]”¹⁰⁴ – a position which he identifies with the likes of E. P. Thompson, which I indirectly discussed in the section 2.3, through the defence of his positions by Meiksins Wood, this position will be further discussed in section 3.2.

Callinicos bases his alternative on several considerations, one is that “Marxism is best understood as a species of naturalism that conceives human beings as continuous with the rest of nature rather than as irreducibly different from the physical world.”¹⁰⁵ This allows a framework that does not fundamentally separate a structural domain as opposed to an empirical domain, and Callinicos is careful to sustain the empirical applicability of his theories, for Callinicos structures essentially play the role of “(partially) determining actors’ powers”¹⁰⁶ centring his perspective on active agents. In presenting his alternative, Callinicos also intends to take seriously, as already implied, the objections arising from methodological individualists and in general analytical Marxists, that our explanations need to “either specify or leave space for the specification of the micro-foundations of these events”. To do so, Callinicos starts from the common premise with rational choice Marxists/methodological individualists that “in acting, agents exercise powers” but he further argues that “[s]ome of these powers are the ones standardly possessed to a greater or lesser degree by any healthy adult human organism [...] [o]ther powers are, however, structurally determined: that is, they

¹⁰¹ I am suggesting of course that it has no explanatory capacity in practice and that it is tautological. This suggestion is arguably not justified in a broad sense, for example it probably would not be justified in the context of an essay that focused primarily on treating the question of methodological individualism. A nuanced discussion of methodological individualism is unfortunately impossible within the space and scope of this essay, such a discussion is provided by books such as Callinicos’ *Making History*, for now this treatment should hopefully suffice as a brief direct engagement with methodological individualism, as some of the premises of methodological individualism will be engaged indirectly through discussing the theory of Callinicos.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* xvii.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* xix.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* xxi, further discussion of this concept in 96 onwards.

depend on the position that the actor in question occupies in prevailing social structures"¹⁰⁷ these structurally determined powers he calls "structural capacities".¹⁰⁸

I think Callinicos' suggestions about "structural capacities", combined with his suggestions on a weak form of "collective agency", provide a framework that avoids a lot of the pitfalls of both the standard structural explanations and the methodological individualist explanations. The justifications he presents for the relevance of structural explanations,¹⁰⁹ such as "the degree of interdependence of action, or "systemness" that societies evidently display",¹¹⁰ that "societies persist in time"¹¹¹, and in my opinion most significantly that "it is a characteristic of social relations that their nature and existence do not depend on the identity of the particular agents involved in them"¹¹². This last point in my opinion however points at the direction of a problem with Callinicos' framework, that he possibly concedes too much to the methodological individualism and the explanatory commitment to micro-foundations. My point here is not to deny that "[i]f human agency is an irreducible aspect of social events, then no explanation of these events is tenable which does not make claims about the intentions and beliefs which actors have and how these will issue in action."¹¹³ Rather, I think it is relevant to argue from a historical materialist perspective that the issue of agency is more complicated. I think it must be noted that, as Marx argues in various places, agents, or in concrete terms, humans, come to be agents within an already continuing process, an "organic whole", which they are always already (from their perspective) involved in,¹¹⁴ that they are individuated with respect to a certain social order.¹¹⁵

Another problematic concession in Callinicos' presentation, I think, is that there are various hidden assumptions in how the premises of such theories are evaluated in the first place. A class-oriented theory of agency should clarify that there is no "neutral form of rational agency". It is not that classes simply condition and mediate agency, "agency" under class society expresses a phenomenon that emerges in the development of that class society, because agents are born into various relations and not simply form them out of their own volition afterwards. To talk about "agency" in non-class societies (in a Marxian sense) is to talk about something paradigmatically different, not that this "agency" would be something exactly akin to how methodological individualists and others talk about it either.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. xx.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ It must be noted that talking about structural explanations, that processes have "structures" to them is not necessarily the same as talking, in the way Meiksins Wood criticises, of "theoretical structures" in a sense responsible for structural determinations.

¹¹⁰ Callinicos is quoting Gibbens here, but it is more relevant to cite Callinicos since this is the part of a larger passage. Callinicos, 38.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid. 92.

¹¹⁴ Marx, "First Premises of Materialistic Method", *The German Ideology*.

¹¹⁵ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 83-85.

¹¹⁶ The reasoning here is in most part through an interpretation of Marx, *Grundrisse*, 84.

3.2 “Voluntarism” and the Class as Subject

Another alternative is the theories furthered by those like Ellen Meiksins Wood.¹¹⁷ To get to her understanding of agency, we need to talk about how she understands structured processes. I understand Ellen Meiksins Wood’s argument about structured processes, to talk about structured processes is to talk about some ways in which processes can emerge as distinct from one another, in the way they develop distinctly from one another by the pressures of a mode of production, which – Meiksins Wood concedes – can be identified as such “as long as the form in which ‘surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producer’ remains essentially the same”.¹¹⁸ The point however is that “*class* relations are the principle of movement *within* the mode of production. The history of a mode of production is the history of its developing class relations and, in particular, their changing relations to the relations of production.”¹¹⁹ Thus, according to her, “[c]lasses develop within a mode of production in the process of coalescing around the relations of production and as the composition, cohesion, consciousness, and organization of the resulting class formations change. The mode of production reaches its crisis when the development of class relations within it actually transforms the relations of production themselves. To account for historical movement, then, means precisely to deny that the relation between class and the relations of production is fixed.”¹²⁰ The entirety of this argument goes to deny the identification of class with class consciousness, through theoretical work that finds out the “objective” interests of the class. This, according to her “transfers volition from human agency – a human agency bounded by ‘determining pressures’ and drawn into ‘involuntary processes’ – to a more exalted Subject, Class, a thing with a static identity, whose will is largely free of specific historical determinations.”¹²¹ Instead, common interests and powers in their historical development come to express a class. Despite Meiksins Wood defending and interpreting the theories of E. P. Thompson, which as I noted Callinicos had termed a “voluntarist”, there seems to be a lot of compatibility between the model provided here and Callinicos, especially considering the elaborations Meiksins Wood provides with regards to “workerism”.¹²²

I think one problem with Meiksins Wood’s discussion is the treatment of those theories that do talk about class as a collective Subject, and that do talk about false consciousness. These are understood to be necessarily “theoretical” arguments that impose various considerations on practical existence, instead of drawing their analysis from that practical existence, as such one argument (alongside the application of the arguments elaborated in section 2.3) against these theories is their association with various strategies that espouse “socialism from

¹¹⁷ I have already touched upon a great deal of the underlying argumentation in section 2.

¹¹⁸ Meiksins Wood, 98.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Meiksins Wood,

¹²² Or “populism” and similar claims, see Meiksins Wood, 100-107.

above” such as “Stalinism” and even “Fabianism”.¹²³ This is also because of these theories conceiving the working class as necessarily being subsumed by hegemony and their forms of thought and patterns of action being developed by it. To give an example, while I would readily concede that Lukács has various “teleologically oriented” statements,¹²⁴ he nonetheless raises important points about the various contradictions of the relationship of the proletariat to the class society, where the only issue is not “hegemony” but also the nature of the interests of the proletariat within class society. As Lukács implies, the sublation¹²⁵ of class society necessitates that “it would be in the interest of any given class to go beyond this immediacy, to annul and transcend its immediate interest by seeing it as a factor within a totality” where this immediacy has to do with “the point in the total process of production at which the interests of the various classes are most immediately and vitally involved”.¹²⁶ That classes describe actually existing and developing relationships within structured processes does not necessarily disprove that there may be aspects with the patterns of movement of those processes, and phenomena that are “necessitated” by or internally reinforced in the reproduction of those processes, that require the participants in the class to consider their situation beyond their immediate psychology or poles around which their class naturally coalesced, but that they have to intervene consciously in the development of their class to bring about. This conclusion also does not require “the construction of a counter-hegemonic consciousness and culture” being “accomplished by free-spirited intellectuals”, to the contrary it indicates the necessity of agents to intervene through conscious appreciation of their situation, organising and intervening in the historical process through a collective agency that they themselves have constructed.¹²⁷

4. Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I attempted to develop the idea that historical materialism should not be understood as the primacy of one set of causes existing in their own sphere (that is, existing according to their own logic), over another set of causes existing in another sphere.¹²⁸ Instead, the materialism of historical materialism emphasises the coherence of an actually existing, practical world, as opposed to the ways in which it seems to be — shines forth as being. In doing so, various ways in which humans conceive or conceptualise the development of their own societies, especially those ways of conceptualisation that are made into the norm on the basis of social actuality — what one might term as “ideological” forms — are subverted. This subversion is not the concession that these “ideological” forms,

¹²³ Ibid. 101.

¹²⁴ An example is Lukács, 2-3. Another is the almost eschatological sounding statements in Lukács, 70 – though even there one must note the emphasis on conscious development and implied choice.

¹²⁵ Dialectical overcoming.

¹²⁶ Lukács, 43.

¹²⁷ See the aforementioned Lukács, 70. As Michael Löwy notes in his preface to the centenary edition, Lukács at the point of writing *History and Class Consciousness* did not argue for a “socialism from above”. See Michael Löwy, preface to *History and Class Consciousness*, xii.

¹²⁸ See the entirety of section 2.

or the ways in which society shines forth, represent the immanent development of another metaphysically distinct sphere, rather the acknowledgement that society exists in the form of sensuous human practice and not just in those ways in which it may be conceptualised or schematized (or conceived).¹²⁹

Through such a methodology as mentioned above, historical materialism as a theory furthers the thesis that society exists as such, as sensuous human activity, as Praxis, assumes that it continues existing, and it continues existing because humans in their Praxis appropriate the world in various ways that they then confront as objects.¹³⁰ That is to say, they produce and reproduce their means of life, and they produce and reproduce their means of life socially, by — regardless of their own wishes — being involved in various relations and a particular arrangement of technics and machinery that together constitute a whole, a particular way of social production, that is, a mode of production.¹³¹ Historical materialism is in part the insistence that this totality, that is as a process emerging and constituting itself actively as a whole, once it is initiated, has its own pattern of development that concerns also its constituents, an immanent movement. This means that this whole develops in a way that is not simply the sum of the patterns of movement that characterise its constituent parts in abstract. This is since they find themselves in a structured process, they develop with relation to one another wherein the entirety of the relationships are more stable than individual parts constituting at one point the relationship¹³² Hence, the original point, the ways in which society is conceptualised, the ways in which legal frameworks are made and developed, the ways in which social movements emerge, all “ideological” production and so on, are *characterised* by the pattern of development of their mode of production that is the core assumption of their existing society, not because they are inferior to, but because they develop as predicated by, the mode of production.¹³³

This scheme does not entail the supremacy of "material" causes or factors, where these are understood to mean those causes and factors that are not "social" or "human" . Rather, it describes a "holistic" (understood in a weaker sense) appreciation of the world and in particular society, wherein "material" causes or factors describe the "basic" assumptions of continued human practice, these "reign supreme" in so far as they underly — per definition — continued human existence, but are not by this merit excluded in a sphere of their own, to the contrary, they are implicated at every step of the way. This signifies a view of society as a continuing process, as an expression of or emerging from human agency, which is itself

¹²⁹ This paragraph mostly summarises the developments of sections 2.2, and 2.3.

¹³⁰ See section 2.3, this part most particularly drawn from the cited Marx quote from *The German Ideology*, Marx, “First Premises of Materialistic Method”, *The German Ideology*.

¹³¹ See the discussions at the end of 2.3, 3.1 and the end of 3.2.

¹³² That is to say, that the relationships one talks of here are essentially irreducible to mere relational properties, since the constituents of these relationships constantly change, also in ways that are not simply explainable by the atomistic transfer of properties through interaction – as particularly highlighted by the arguments of Callinicos about structural explanations presented in section 3.1.

¹³³ See the discussion throughout section 2. This last part particularly is a word for word repetition of the end of 2.3.

understood here to be characterised in various ways by its own consequences in the continuing arrangement of society.

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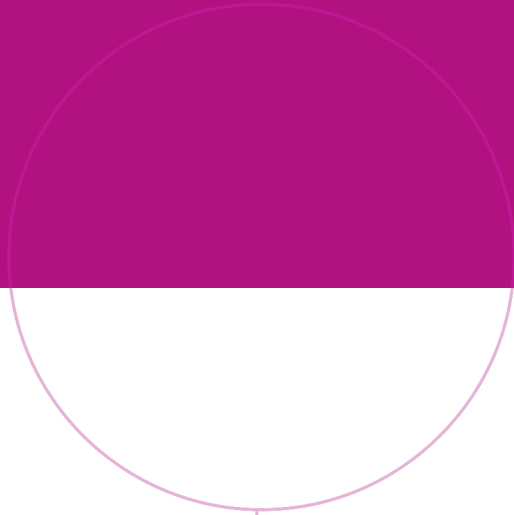
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