Historical Materialism

Karl Marx

Marx and the Problem of Economic Determinism

By adopting an empirical approach to the study of human existence, and by attempting to make of it a science, Marx sets out to challenge the idealism that exerted such an influence on German thought in the 19th century.

The idealist, such as Hegel or Plato, believes that there is a realm of true being that supersedes and, in some sense, determines or controls the material events of human history. Hegel, for example, conceived of an Absolute being that puts matter into motion from the realm of pure spirit. The course of human history is then the attempt of the Absolute to project itself into matter and thus to extend its existence beyond the limitations of pure spirit through the vehicle of individual human lives. The Absolute, according to Hegel, "completes itself" through "Man".

The problem with Hegel's view, according to Marx, is that it starts with a theory, in this case a set of theological assumptions about God (the Absolute Spirit) and the role of nature in the divine plan. But such an approach introduces a bias that can never be overcome. As a result of Hegel’s theological bias, he constructs an elaborate and ingenious speculative philosophical system which merely reinforces and rationalizes his own personal beliefs which are not subject to observation or refutation. This is not the proper way to proceed according to empiricist and scientific principles of explanation. One must start with a question (not an answer) and appeal to the facts in order to answer the question. Thus, it is through observation of facts that one derives a theory; one does not rearrange the facts in order to fit an a priori assumption. In this conflict between Hegel and Marx we see, once again, a contrast between rationalist and empiricist approaches.

Marx felt that by looking at the actual history of real human societies one forms a very different view of the world. More specifically, Marx came to the view that if we look honestly at the historical record of material (economic, social and political) events taking place from the ancient through the feudal and ultimately to the capitalist form of political economy, we find a pattern emerging. Based on this pattern, Marx felt it was possible to predict the emergence of a new form of social order.

The Problem with Capitalism

Through his critique of Hegel and his own historical studies, Marx came to the conclusion that capitalism—the quintessentially modern form of economic relations in the West—violates the essence of human nature, which is grounded in the need to work, i.e. to transform nature and express oneself through one's creations (homo faber). The problem of the modern world is that human beings have been separated from that which is essential to a good life, viz. control over the process of making things for their own use and pleasure.

How did the distortion in our lives arise?

In ancient societies, people had their own tools and were able to initiate and complete an entire process of production. So, for example, a weaver would raise sheep, shear them, spin the wool and weave the fabric on his or her own spinning wheel and loom. One had control over the production and distribution of the “fruits of one’s own labor".
In feudal societies, both the tools and the surplus value\(^1\) of the goods were appropriated by the aristocracy in exchange for the use of land and for protection. But as the demands of trade and the newly emerging market economy increased, productivity and specialization also increased. As wealth and ownership moved increasingly into the hands of merchants, traders and entrepreneurs, the forces of production (tools) were consolidated by the emerging class of owners and kept from the workers who were employed only for the sake of their labor. In the process, labor itself became a commodity controlled by the owners of the tools. (This control is part of the relations of production as Marx describes them.)

Thus, in this new situation, the worker merely operates a loom and has no control over the choice or distribution of the fabric produced. In this way, the worker is separated from the fruits of his or her labor and is given money in exchange for that labor. At the same time, the profits (surplus value) are controlled by the owners of the tools. And the artifact produced becomes the objectification of labor—a mere thing—alien to the worker in the sense that it no longer expresses the interests and creativity of its producer, nor does it in any sense “belong” to the people involved in its production.

All of this constitutes what Marx calls the "alienation of labor" and can be summarized as follows:

1. Under capitalist conditions of labor, work does not flow from one’s own desires and interests, i.e. from one’s own nature.
2. Thus, the work is not stimulating or satisfying. One doesn’t feel “at home” in the work. The work becomes alien to one’s nature as a human being.
3. Only in leisure time does one feel at home and in control of one’s life.
4. It follows that work in this setting can only be a means to an end, not an end in itself, and therefore not fulfilling. It is always work for someone else, often someone unknown to the maker\(^2\).
5. One is freely active only in the animal functions of eating, drinking and procreating, which become the sole ends of life.
6. The human being’s desire to make things independent of a need for them is frustrated and the quality of one’s life is diminished.
7. Private property is the product of this alienated labor.

This alienation is a denial of human freedom and self-determination. It prevents us from acting in our own true interests for the purpose of self-realization and happiness.

**Basic Premise of Historical Materialism**

> The material, economic relations of life determine human consciousness (one’s way of thinking—one’s “sense of reality”), as well as, (a) the particular forms of state and social organization, (b) political and legal structures, and (c) the ruling ideology (the dominant social, political, moral, and aesthetic view of the world).

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\(^1\) "According to Marx, in given conditions, man can produce more than he needs to consume in order to continue working; he therefore produces surplus value. This surplus value is appropriated by those who command labor and own the means of production - before capitalism, by openly appropriating the surplus product; in the monetary economy of capitalism, by paying the worker less than the value of what he produces, by paying him enough for his subsistence as opposed to the value of the products he creates." [Eugene Kamenka, *The Portable Marx*, 568.]

\(^2\) Cf. Kant’s notion of objectification—using something simply as a means to an end—and the possible moral implications for owners and workers.
Ethical Basis
One of the central problems in modern societies, according to Marx, is the unequal distribution of resources and unequal access to the means of production. The solution he proposed was the socialization of the means of production wherein the workers assume ownership and control of the means of production. Thus, the ethical assumption that motivates much of Marx’s thinking is based on a principle of equality—that everyone should have the possibility of living equally satisfying lives. Note that this is not the same as saying that our lives should be identical or that everyone should have the same income, resources, etc. We all have different abilities, capacities and interests which lead to different types and levels of achievement in life. This is natural. What the principle of equality says is that everyone should have the same opportunities as everyone else. No one should be given advantages that are not shared by all.

So, according to Marx, the human being is defined by work. Creativity in the sense of free productive labor is what gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Alienation arises when one is unable to realize his or her potential for creative and cooperative work.

Surplus Value and Objectification

Marx thought that this thwarting of one’s creative potential was generally the result of the commodification of labor, i.e. when one person works for another in exchange for money. By the nature of the situation, the worker is treated as a means to an end (the owner’s profit) and loses control of the fruits of his or her labor.

To see how this might work, consider the simple example of a couple working together to make chairs. Let’s assume that initially they can make
   a. all the chairs they need for their own family,
   b. all the chairs necessary to cover their expenses, and to replace worn-out equipment, and
   c. some additional chairs.

Those additional chairs amount to surplus value—they go beyond the needs and the use to which the chairs can be put by the makers.

Now, keep in mind that whoever controls the production of the chairs also determines the distribution of the surplus value. For example,
   a. Under conditions of independent production with no state control (complete autonomy), chair makers use the surplus value (additional chairs) any way they like, i.e. they can sell them, trade them, or give them away as gifts.
   b. Under the more restrictive conditions of feudalism, workers are given a place to live and the necessities of life. In exchange they must turn over to the landowner whatever the landowner demands. Thus, the landowner (who also owns the equipment used in the production of goods) would control the distribution of the surplus product generated by the chair makers.
   c. Under capitalism, the workers are hired by a manufacturer to produce chairs. The workers are given a wage in exchange for their labor. If we assume the workers make the same number of chairs as they would have made if they were working independently, then the owner has control over their surplus value. Thus, the one who hires the chair makers, owns the tools and the work place, also retains the profit.

By the very nature of capitalist production, it is in the best interests of the owner of the chair manufacturing business to maximize profit. This is done by
   a. minimizing expenses, and
   b. maximizing labor and productivity relative to
   c. the existing demand for chairs.
According to Marx, this way of producing goods treats the worker’s labor, and, hence, the worker, as an object or commodity. This commodification of labor amounts to an exploitation of workers in both a material and moral sense.
   a. The exploitation is material in that it takes from the workers that which they have earned through their own labor and could have used for their own economic benefit.
   b. The exploitation is unethical in that it places limits on the productivity and satisfaction of the workers by taking away “the fruits of their labor”. In other words, by treating the worker as a commodity, s/he is used simply as a means to an end. Such objectification of a person is unjust in that it violates the notion of a person as autonomous and self-governing. (It is always wrong to use another simply as a means to end rather than an end in itself.)

Base/Superstructure Model

What values would it make sense for one to subscribe to as a manufacturer of chairs?
   a. a strong work ethic.
   b. order and discipline.
   c. economic growth and prosperity.
   d. individual liberty.

According to Marx, these values (which he places in the superstructure) are a reflection of the economic relations that exist between the owners and the workers (in the base) and the interest of the owners in maintaining the status quo. [Cf. “Politics and Law” and “Ideology” on the chart titled “Marx: Historical Materialism”.]

Social change occurs through a working out of the contradictions contained in the base and reflected in the superstructure.

Problems
   a. Revolution has not occurred worldwide.
   b. Where revolution has occurred, it appears to have been unsuccessful.
   c. The theory is useful but the scope is too limited. What about the exploited who can’t work, or who are exploited on non-economic bases, e.g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc?
   d. Strict economic determination as embodied in the base/superstructure model is too crude. Cultural production is also production, not just ideology. (Cf. Raymond Williams and cultural materialism.)

T. R. Quigley
Appendix

Capitalism

The mode of production based on private property in the means of production, production for a market, and the use of money as pervasive features of the economy and on the rule of the bourgeoisie. Marx distinguishes between the big bourgeoisie, international in character, owning and developing the major means of production and creating an international market and a world in its own image, and a petty bourgeoisie of small shopkeepers, professional men, etc., destined to be proletarianized by the inherent tendency of capitalism to sharpen and simplify all social conflicts and relationships into the contrast between the owners of the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and those who own nothing but their labour power (the proletariat). The inherent contradictions of capitalism, which will bring about its collapse, lie not only in the fundamental and inescapable contradiction between the interests of a small owning class and a large labouring class. They lie also in what Marx sees as an inescapable fall in the rate of profit as the proportion of investment in machinery increases; this leads to necessarily increasingly vicious exploitation of the proletariat and to a growing army of the unemployed. The unplanned nature of capitalist production based on private profit leads, in these circumstances, to overproduction and underconsumption and to the consequent recurrence of ever more serious economic crises. The extent to which Marx recognizes countervailing trends which do not make the collapse of capitalism economically inevitable, or which make possible a gradual socialization of capitalism from within, as the result of economic forces or of political democratic development, is a matter of controversy.

Eugene Kamenka, The Portable Karl Marx, 561f