

Western Philosophy of Social Science

Lecture 6. Historical materialism reconsidered

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What are the main assumptions of historical materialism?

- Human beings have material needs: nutrition, shelter, clothing, water, ...
- Every society consists of a system of production and distribution of material goods for use by members.
- Societies generally produce a surplus of material goods.
- Societies embody classes who struggle over control of the surplus.

The framework

- HM maintains: facts about the social and technical properties of the production process in a society “determine” the properties of non-economic institutions (state, ideology, culture, etc.).

Periods of historical development

- Marx offers a largescale framework for representing social and economic history as a series of modes of production.
- He singles out “oriental despotism,” primitive society (hunter-gatherer society), classical slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and post-capitalism.
- He sees the stages of history as being a sequence of modes of production.
- This is a bad theory (sequence).

What kind of theory is HM?

- Is it a philosophical theory (like Hegel's theory of history as the unfolding of the concept of freedom)?
- Is it an empirical theory of human social development?
- Is it an intellectual research framework embodying hypotheses for future research? Is it intended to guide more specific historical research?
- What is the intellectual basis of the theory?

Historical materialism

- Concrete social production as the historical context of the human
- Stages of development in production
- Forces and relations of production
 - Technology
 - Property relations
 - Relations of domination and control
 - Class and exploitation
 - Slavery, feudalism, capitalism

Forces of production

- The forms of technology existent within a given society on the basis of which the society produces the goods needed to satisfy the needs of its population
- “Machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphy, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground” (R1848:72).

Relations of production

- The social relations of power and authority through which the forces of production are utilized, organized and enjoyed.
- The social-property system of a society.
- System of control of resources, land, capital, and labor
- System of distribution of the product to participants

Relations of production

- “The various stages of development in the division of labour are just so many different forms of ownership, I.e. the existing stage of the division of labour determines also the relations of individuals to one another with reference to the material, instrument, and product of labour” (GI : 43).

History as class conflict

- The relations of production define a system of great classes in a given society.
- Marx believes that the relations of production generally create a system of surplus extraction, a system of “exploitation”, by one class of another.
- Marx believes that these classes invariably represent a profound and irresolvable conflict of interest between the dominant class and the producing class.

History as class conflict

- Members of classes come to recognize their real interests and come to have the capacity of organization and militancy needed to oppose the dominant class.

Individuals in historical materialism

- “The fact is, then, that definite individuals who are productively active in a specific way enter into these definite social and political relations” (111).
- The individual is “shaped” by the conditions of social life created by the economic structure.

The superstructure

- Marx refers to non-economic social phenomena as the “superstructure” of society: state, ideology, law, culture, morality.
- This implies that the superstructure is determined by the economic structure.
- Does Marx deny historical alternatives?
- How do anomalies such as social democracy or fascism fit into this theory?

What is “determination”?

- What does Marx mean by saying that the economic structure determines other social factors?
- Causal determination?
- Functional relationship?
- Filtering or selecting of “feasible” political institutions?
- Design of higher-level institutions by agents of dominant class?

Technological determinism?

- Does Marx believe that change in technology drives the rest of social development? Does innovation in agriculture give rise to change in the property system, the value system, and the economic structure?
- Are technologies consistent with substantially different bundles of social relations and institutions?

Economic determinism?

- Does Marx believe that the relations of production are primary in historical change?
- Does he believe that the property system drives historical change, including technological change?
- Or does he look at technology and property as an interlocking set of factors, each of which constrains and propels the other, and leading as a system to changes in other aspects of society?
- *Capital* appears to give primacy to economic structure.

Status of historical materialism

- Best understood as a research program; a guide for future research that may turn out to be fruitful or unfruitful.
- Can't be directly confirmed or refuted.
- Can give some evidence for thinking the approach is promising.

A research program

- Seek out the “material” institutions—property, technology, labor
- Examine non-material institutions from the point of view of their role within a social system of production and control. Ideology, state, culture.
- Examine the nature of inter-group exploitation; the schemes of domination that these require; and the forms of struggle that result

A research program ...

- Pay attention to the lived experience of persons within social institutions
- Examine the centrality of class structures—lived experience, exploitation, behavior and incentive, social change
- Identify enduring structures—economic, political, cultural—through which the activities of individuals within society are channeled

Limits

- Marx's economic analysis is not logically dependent on HM
- The economic analysis is a research that extends the HM paradigm; but we might conclude that HM is insufficient without discrediting the economic analysis.

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