

Notes on Historical Materialism,  
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Socialism is the social ownership of the means of production and their use to satisfy the material and cultural needs of all society. It is the resolution of the primary contradiction of capitalism. It is the end of the exploitation of man by man. Socialism can be achieved only by the struggle of the working class, guided by a scientific socialist theory. That theory is Historical Materialism.

Marx and Engels based their concept of socialism on a scientific understanding of the laws of social development and the laws of the class struggle. Engels expresses his and Marx's two fundamental insights:

“Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case.”

-- *Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx.*

“That all past history was the history of class struggles; that these warring classes are always the product of the conditions of production and exchange, in a word, of the economic conditions of their time; that therefore the economic structure of society always forms the real basis from which, in the last analysis, is to be explained the whole superstructure of legal and political institutions, as well as of the religious, philosophical and other conceptions of each historical period.”

-- *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, ch. 2.

The work of Marx and Engels rests on three fundamental principles:

1. That society in its development is regulated by objective laws discoverable by science.
2. That views and institutions, political, ideological and cultural developments, arise on the basis of the development of the material life of society.
3. That ideas and institutions which thus arise on the basis of conditions of material life play an active role in the development of material life.

The meaning of law in Historical Materialism:

Laws are approximate expression of objective regularities discoverable in events.

By society developing in accordance with objective laws, we mean “(1) that social events take place only when the conditions causing such events have come into being.... (2) that once certain events have taken place their effects will follow, independently of people’s desires or intentions. Subsequent actions, subsequent events may modify these effects, but cannot nullify them.... (3) that though circumstances are continually changing, and exactly the same circumstances never recur, nevertheless the same causal connections are discoverable in different sequences of events.”

-- Maurice Cornforth, *Historical Materialism*, ch. 2.

“The Marxist concept of social laws is not fatalistic, but shows how people by their own efforts can and do change society. Nor does it deny the role of individual leaders, but show that such leaders always represent and serve the interests of classes.”

-- Maurice Cornforth, *Historical Materialism*, ch. 2.

The role of ideas in social life: the material life of a society determines its intellectual life. Materialism holds that matter, or the material world, is primary, while mind or thought is secondary and derivative. This is true, but the reality is somewhat more complex.

The concept of Hegemony.

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), second General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, wrote his *Prison Notebooks* while imprisoned by the Fascists from 1926 to 1937. In these notebooks Gramsci elaborated his theory of Hegemony.

The fundamental insight of the theory of Hegemony is that no ruling class can rule by coercion alone. Coercion is too costly and exhausts the resources of a ruling class. The ruling class augments the threat of coercion with control of all the fundamental means of socialization in a society: schools, mass media, entertainment, churches, social organizations, even the family. These institutions are conditioned to represent and inculcate the values of the ruling class, to make alternatives to the supremacy of the ruling class literally unthinkable. A hegemonic culture is created, which propagates the ruling class’ own values and norms so that they became the “common sense” values of all. People in the working class (and other classes) identify their own good with the good of the bourgeoisie, and help to maintain the *status quo* rather than revolting.

Hegemony is an important way to explain the augmentation of bourgeois control and the expansion of the bourgeois state to more than simply a coercive role. However, it also shows the dialectical way ideas which arise from a specific set of material conditions can also help to mold the evolution of material conditions: hegemony shows specifically how the basis and superstructure can interact in complex dialectical ways, with the basis being ultimately determinative, but itself profoundly influenced by the ideas it has brought forth. Indeed, the ruling class can recast its interests through passive revolution by manipulation of hegemony, e.g., cooptation of trade unions, and, indeed, by going

beyond its immediate economic interests and allowing the forms of its hegemony to change. Gramsci regards movements such as reformism and Fascism, as well as the Frederick Taylor's system of "scientific management" and Henry Ford's introduction of assembly line methods, as examples of this.

Unpacking the Historical Materialist style of analysis:

The way in which people produce and exchange their means of life is called the **MODE OF PRODUCTION**.

The mode of production is always social, because each individual does not produce the whole of his material needs for himself, solely by his own labor, independent of other individuals.

We must distinguish two related phenomena: (1) the **FORCES OF PRODUCTION** and (2) the **RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION**.

The forces of production are (1) the instruments of production and (2) the people who use those instruments.

"In making and using the instruments of production, in acquiring and exercising their production experience and skill, people enter into relations with each other, whereby they are associated and organized in the process of social production.... But when people carry on production they must needs enter into social relationships, not only with one another, but also with the *means of production* which they are utilising.

"By the 'means of production', we denote something more than the instruments of production. We denote all those means which are necessary to produce the finished product – including not only the instruments (which are part of the forces of production), but also land, raw materials, buildings in which production is undertaken, and so on."

-- Maurice Cornforth, *Historical Materialism*, ch. 4.

It is from production that *property* relations develop: in social production, the means of production become the property of various people or groups of people, because it is necessary that some arrangement, binding on society, must be made by which it is known who is entitled to dispose of the various means of production and the products of production. This doesn't arise from a general decision or "social contract," but by the anarchic nature of production and the ability of some people to force others to abide by their entitlement (division of labor is another factor in this dynamic).

"The products of productive activity are appropriated in various different ways, and so differently distributed among members of society, according to the type of economy prevailing."

-- Maurice Cornforth, *Historical Materialism*, ch. 4.

Examples of primitive communism and mature socialism.

Division of labor breaks up the primitive system of communal production and results in ownership of the means of production passing into the hands of particular individuals and groups. With it passes the right to private appropriation of the product of production. With division of labor also commences the transformation of the product into a commodity (which comes to full fruition under capitalism). Division of labor is also associated with growth in the productivity of labor. Where formally the production of a tribe could barely arrive at subsistence, division of labor increases productivity and produces a surplus. Hence there arises the possibility that those who own the means of production can appropriate to themselves, without labor, the surplus of the labor of others. This is the origin of EXPLOITATION.

“...the essence of exploitation is always the same: the producers produce a surplus over and above their essential requirements, and this surplus is appropriated by non-producers by virtue of their ownership of some form of property.”

-- Maurice Cornforth, *Historical Materialism*, ch. 4.

CLASSES also arise from the division of labor, since “the community is divided into groups occupying different positions in social production as a whole, with different relationships to the means of production and therefore different methods of acquiring their share of product.”

-- Maurice Cornforth, *Historical Materialism*, ch. 4.

Lenin’s definition of classes:

“Classes are large groups of people which differ from each other by the place they occupy in a historically definite system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in laws) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the social wealth that they obtain and their method of acquiring their share of it. Classes are groups of people one of which may appropriate the labour of another, owing to the different places they occupy in the definite system of social economy.”

-- *A Great Beginning*.

Class interests between exploiting and exploited classes are necessarily antagonistic. For this reason “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”

-- K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

Class-in-itself; class-in-and-for-itself.

Historical Development of Types of Economic Systems (hugely simplified):

“1. *Primitive Communism*, in which the means of production are held in common and there exist neither classes nor exploitation.

“2. *Slavery*, in which the master class owns both the means of production and slaves. Slavery involved the break-up of the former communal property, the passing of the means of production into the hands of a few proprietors, and the enslavement of the producers.

“3. *Feudalism*, in which the serf is tied to the land and renders tribute to the landowner. The rise of the feudal system involved the freeing of slaves, the fall of the slave-owners, the rise of a new class of feudal landowners, the conversion of the producers into serfs.”  
-- Maurice Cornforth, *Historical Materialism*, ch. 4.

“4. *Capitalism*, in which the capitalist owns the means of production and in which the worker, being entirely divorced from the means of production, is forced to sell his labour power to the capitalist for wages. The rise of the capitalist system involved the abolition of the ties which bound the serf to the land, the fall of the feudal lords and the rise of the capitalists, the conversion of the producers into propertyless proletarians.

“5. *Socialism*, in which the means of production are once again socially owned, in which the exploitation of man by man is abolished, and in which the whole of social production is planned for the benefit of society as a whole. The rise of socialism involves the expropriation of the capitalists.”  
-- Maurice Cornforth, *Historical Materialism*, ch. 4.

Fundamental laws of social development:

1. Development of the forces of production is ever-present, both in the form of the acquisition of new instruments of production and in change and development in the production-experience and labor-skill of people. Changes in technology always entail both changes in the instruments of production and changes in the relations of production.

As Marx observed,

“Man opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces, setting in motions arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate nature’s production in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway.”  
-- *Capital*, vol. i, ch. 7.

2. The development of productive forces and production relations shows that the rise of new productive forces and of corresponding relations of production is general an unplanned, spontaneous development.

This fundamentally changes under socialism, where planned technological change and planned changes in relations of production increasingly become the norm.

3. Changes in the relations of production depend on development of the forces of production.

4. Class struggle is the motive force of social change. "...[S]ociety has developed through a series of revolutions. And this development is effected by means of class struggle.

"The new economic system is established thanks to the rise of new classes, which struggle for dominance in society, overthrow the old ruling class and establish a new ruling class and a new system of production relations,

"As the forces of production develop, and as new relations of production are brought into being corresponding to the development of the forces of production, so do classes arise and develop."

-- Maurice Cornforth, *Historical Materialism*, ch. 5.

5. "The state is not the whole of society, but a special organization within society, armed with power to repress and coerce, which serves the function of preserving and safeguarding the given social order. Whatever the form of the state – whether it is an autocracy, a military dictatorship, a democracy, etc. – its most essential component consist of the means to exercise compulsion over the majority of society."

-- Maurice Cornforth, *Historical Materialism*, ch. 5.

Important components of the state include bodies of armed men (e.g. army, police), an administrative bureaucracy, and a legal system.

Note also the important component of Hegemony.

6. The whole of human progress consists in man's increasing mastery over nature. There is a contradiction involved in this dynamic: with every advance in mastery of nature, new forms and modes of exploitation have emerged, ensnaring more and more of humanity. Socialism constitutes the resolution of this contradiction.

7. The culmination of all hitherto struggles and progress is the socialist revolution.

"The socialist revolution differs in kind from every previous revolutionary change in human society.

"In every revolution the economic structure of society is transformed. Every previous transformation had meant the birth and consolidation of a new form of exploitation. The socialist revolution, on the other hand, once and for all ends all exploitation of man by man."

-- Maurice Cornforth, *Historical Materialism*, ch. 5.

## DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT

- Smashing of the bourgeois state. Use of the proletarian state to coerce the exploiting classes.
- Abolition of the exploitation of man by man.
- The overturning of capitalist hegemony and the building of Socialist and Communist hegemony.

“It is said and written that the core of Marx’s theory is the class struggle; but this is not true.... To limit Marxism to the theory of class struggle means curtailing Marxism, distorting it, reducing it to something which is acceptable to the bourgeoisie. A Marxist is one who extends the acceptance of the class struggle to the acceptance of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This is where the profound difference lies between a Marxist and an ordinary petty (or even big bourgeois. This is the touchstone on which the real understanding and acceptance of Marxism should be accepted.”

-- V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*.