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THE ROLE OF CLASSES IN HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

DONALD CLARK HODGES

OF THE two major contributions of Marx, namely, the materialistic conception of history and the theory of surplus value or exploitation, the former provides the general basis of the latter and was considered by Marx to be the "leading thread" in his economic studies.¹ The theory of classes was not regarded by Marx as an independent discovery of his own. What he did that was new was to show that the division into classes lies at the root of historical modes of production and at the heart of historical materialism. The general thesis of historical materialism is that the consciousness of men is governed by their material mode of existence. Historical materialism asserts that a man's behavior is determined, even though unconsciously, by his relationship to the means of production and that his religious, moral, and political principles are similarly conditioned. However, that does not mean that his principles are a reflection of his class interests, for Marxians are well aware of the extent of human irrationality and of the incongruity between the avowed principles of men and their economic circumstances. The reciprocal influence of institutions and ideologies upon human behavior makes possible such irrationality. Historical materialism needs to be distinguished from vulgar materialism or the theory that human behavior is ultimately conditioned by material interests. For it is not material interest but the material mode of existence that is capable of explaining the irrationality and rationality of human behavior.

A source of major disagreement among Marxian sociologists is the problem of which aspect of the mode of production exercises the dominant influence upon institutions and ideas. Some have argued

¹ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, tr., N. I. Stone (Chicago, 1913), p. 11.

that it is technology; others, that it is productive labor; still others, that it is the social relations of production or the division of society into classes. The so-called economic interpretation of history is a loose way of designating at least three different interpretations of historical materialism. Besides technological determinism and labor determinism, which are theories of the forces of production, there is the theory of class determinism. In the strict sense, economic determinism is the theory that the development of the productive forces is the principal agency of history. The question is what was Marx's own view of the matter. Is economic determinism the key to historical materialism or is the theory of classes? The purpose of the following discussion is to show that there are several rooms to the Marxian mansion and that different keys unlock different doors. Specifically, there is need for distinguishing between the basement and living quarters or between the foundation and focus of Marxian sociology.

I. *The Analysis of the Sources*

Unlike the Marxian theory of surplus value to which Marx gave most of his energies, his theory of historical materialism was never systematically developed either by him or by Engels. In different works he developed different aspects of the theory, but no single work presents it in its totality. On analysis, historical materialism breaks down into five distinct although complementary theories: (1) economic determinism (which is most fully developed in Marx's economic writings, notably, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, *Capital*, and in Engels' major work on primitive economics, *The Origin of the Family*); (2) class determinism (which is the heart of historical materialism and, consequently, a theory which is to be found in all of Marx's major works); (3) state and revolution (which is most fully developed in Marx's and Engels' political and historical writings, notably, *The Class Struggles in France*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, *The Civil War in France*, *Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and *Critique of the Gotha Programme*); (4) ideological conception (Marx's and Engels' contribution to the sociology of knowledge, expanded and illustrated in their writings on the history of ideas, in particular, *The German Ideology* and *Ludwig Feuer-*

bach); and (5) historical dialectics (in part, the application to history of Marx's and Engels' philosophy of dialectical materialism, developed by Engels in his distinctively philosophical works, such as *Ludwig Feuerbach* and *Anti-Dühring*; in part, the science of the laws of social change, which is an essential ingredient of everything Marx and Engels wrote within the general field of sociology).

The most concise statement of the doctrine of historical materialism is from Marx's and Engels' *The German Ideology*, which may be analyzed as follows:

Our conception of history depends on our ability (1) to expound the real process of production starting out from the simple material production of life, and (2) to comprehend the form of intercourse connected with this and created by this (i.e., civil society in its various stages), as the basis of all history; further, (3) to show it in its action as State; and so, from this starting-point, (4) to explain the whole mass of different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc., etc., and (5) trace their origins and growth, by which means, of course, the whole thing can be shown in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another).²

The first four divisions in this statement correspond roughly to Hegel's division into family, civil society, state, and culture. Such are the four major levels of social existence ordered according to their distance from the productive-reproductive base. Unlike Hegel, Marx and Engels included the process of production with that of reproduction in a single economic foundation, while arguing that it is the material basis of existence that determines the higher forms of culture, and not conversely. The fifth and last part of this statement emphasizes the importance of historical dialectics in explaining the development of each of these levels and the reciprocal action of each upon one another. Such is the dynamic aspect of historical materialism, which aims to understand the laws of social change and the direction of historical movement.

By economic determinism in the strict sense is meant the dependence of social classes, as well as state and culture, upon the forces

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed., R. Pascal (New York, 1947), p. 28; numerical inserts mine.

of production. However, the forces of production do not directly determine ideas and institutions, but only indirectly through the agency of social classes. The classes are the sole direct determinants of the higher levels of society; they alone react directly upon the economic base. For Marx, the prime agency of history does not consist of the forces of production, whether technology or productive laborers, any more than it consists of the state or culture. Technological, political, and cultural history are aspects of class history. It is true that culture depends directly upon the state, since the ruling ideas at any given time are authorized by the state. However, the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class of which the state is only an executive organ. History is determined, in the last analysis, by the mode of production, but only through the intermediary of classes. As the latter are the sole direct determinants of productive forces, institutions, and ideas, it follows that historical materialism in essence is a theory of class determinism.

That the Marxian theory of classes is the focus of Marxian sociology, and not the theory of productive forces or economic determinism in the narrow sense, is amply supported by Marx's and Engels' discussion of civil society in *The German Ideology*. By definition, civil society embraces "the whole material intercourse of individuals within a definite stage of the development of productive forces," so that it is synonymous with the social relations of production and reproduction.³ Although determined by the existing productive forces, in its turn it determines these. The earliest societies were based upon the simple family and its multiple, the tribe: "already here we see how this *civil society is the true source and theatre of all history*, and how nonsensical is the conception of history held hitherto, which neglects the real relationships and confines itself to high-sounding dramas of princes and states."⁴ The history of civil society is far more significant than political or intellectual history because it is the basis of the latter. As there is no technology without civil society, the social relations of production are also, in a sense, more basic than technique. As the history of civil society is, for the most part, the history of class relations, the core of Marxian sociology is its theory of classes.

An expanded statement of the meaning of historical material-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, italics mine.

ism was also given by Engels in his preface of 1888 to the English translation of *The Communist Manifesto*. On analysis, his statement asserts:

(A) That in every historical epoch, (1) the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and (2) the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, (3) the political and (4) intellectual history of that epoch; (B) (1) that consequently the whole history of mankind (since the dissolution of primitive tribal society, holding land in common ownership) has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes; (2) that the history of these class struggles forms a series of evolutions in which, nowadays, a stage has been reached where the exploited and oppressed class—the proletariat—cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class—the bourgeoisie—without at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinctions and class struggles.⁵

The first part (A) gives the four fundamental levels of human society and the order of vertical dependence of each, based ultimately upon the mode of production. The second part (B) implies that the several levels of society converge upon the theory of classes, which is the principal link between the forces of production and the higher levels of institutional and ideological behavior. The first part (A) is meant to explain the fundamental historical thesis of *The Communist Manifesto*, namely, (B) that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Thus the class struggle is based on the mode of production and is expressed in institutions and ideologies. The second part (B) is divided into two parts corresponding to the division into past and future history. Although all past history is the history of exploitation, the dialectical prospect is that the struggle between exploited classes will lead ultimately to the negation of history as a class struggle and to the establishment of a classless society.

The classic and most frequently cited statement of the theory of historical materialism is from Marx's Preface to *A Contribution*

⁵ Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Preface, January 30, 1888 (New York, 1932), p. 6; alphabetical and numerical inserts mine.

to the *Critique of Political Economy*. This statement also requires analysis:

(A) In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitute the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The (1) mode of production in material life determines the general character of the (2) social, (3) political and (4) spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness. (B) (1) At a certain stage of their development, (a) the material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they had been at work before. (b) From forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. (c) Then comes the period of social revolution. (d) With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations the distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must rather be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production. (e) No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces, for which there is room in it, have been developed; and (f) new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society. Therefore, (g) mankind always takes up only such problems as it can solve; since, looking at the matter closely, one will always find that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. (h) In broad outline we can designate the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and the modern bourgeois methods of production as so many epochs in the

progress of the economic formation of society. (2) The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production—antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from conditions surrounding the life of individuals in society; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. This social formation constitutes, therefore, the closing chapter of the prehistoric stage of human society.⁶

The first part (A) of this extended statement of historical materialism once again gives the four fundamental levels of human behavior and the order of vertical dependence of each. Whereas the mode of production determines the social, political, and cultural patterns of life, it determines institutions and ideas *via* man's social existence, i.e., indirectly. The second part (B) formulates some of the principal laws of social change. The material or economic substratum is not only a necessary condition of man's higher social, political, and cultural life, but a change in the mode of production is a sufficient condition of political and cultural change. The first part (A) describes the vertical order of dependence at any given moment of history, whereas the second part (B) emphasizes the dynamics of social change in the vertical dimension or the causal interrelations of the several levels. In addition, (B) explains the horizontal order or causal sequence of the principal cultures corresponding to the different modes of production. Finally, the division of (B) into two parts is based on the differences between Marx's theory of past history and his prognosis of the future.

On analysis, there are two different sides to the historical materialist conception of history. On one hand, there is the Marxian sociology, in the narrow sense, which is concerned with the analysis of the principal levels of society at a given moment of history. On the other hand, there is the Marxian philosophy of history, which is concerned with the laws of social development. Together they comprise the Marxian science of society, which is merely another term for the general theory of historical materialism. The Marxian sociology integrates the four special theories of economic

⁶ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, pp. 11-13; alphabetical and numerical inserts mine.

determinism, class determinism, state and revolution, and ideological conception; whereas the Marxian philosophy of history is co-extensive with historical dialectics. According to Croce, the materialist interpretation of history has "developed in two directions, distinct in kind if not in practice, *viz*: (1) a movement relating to the writing of history, and (2) a science and philosophy of society."⁷ The materialist conception of history or science of society is neither exclusively history nor exclusively sociology, as some socialists have maintained, but is a combination of both, i.e., an historical sociology and a sociological history designed to serve proletarian interests.

II. *The General Structure of the Theory*

The most often appealed to formula for uniting the several special theories of historical materialism is that the economic or material basis of society is, in the last analysis, the necessary condition of the existence of classes, political institutions, and ideologies, and that changes in the former are, in the long run, the sufficient condition of causal transformations in the latter. This formula implies the identification of the economic base with the productive forces, inasmuch as the existence of classes is said to be determined by it. It implies also that the particular sequence of social formations and the laws of social change which explain it follow upon changes in technology. However, the essential difference between the different modes of production is not different technologies, but "lies only in the mode in which . . . surplus-labor is in each case extracted from the actual producers, the laborers."⁸ The nature of all past societies is determined by the social relations of production or, more specifically, by the mode of exploitation. Indeed, the class distinctions implied by slavery, serfdom, and wage-labor are more significant for an understanding of different modes of production than the corresponding distinctions in technology.

The economic factor is the leading principle of sociological

⁷ Benedetto Croce, *Historical Materialism and the Economics of Karl Marx*, tr., C. M. Meredith (London, 1914), p. 28; italics deleted.

⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital*. Vol. I, Kerr ed. (Chicago, 1906), p. 241.

interpretation only inasmuch as it stands for the mode of exploitation. For the purpose of cultural and political history it is impossible to dispense with reference to the productive forces, provided the period covered is a fairly short one. Thus Marx's and Engels' writings in the field of political history are based upon a class analysis of political phenomena rather than upon economic analysis. One explanation of their apparent abandonment of economic determinism for the theory of class struggle is that their political histories are limited to decisive crises and social revolutions, to short-term periods in which the technological factors are less relevant to an understanding of social change. As Engels explains, in a letter to Conrad Schmidt, the anthropologist is hard pressed to discover the economic causes of primitive ideas about spirits, magic forces, etc., so that "even though economic necessity was the main driving force of the progressive knowledge of nature and becomes ever more so, it would surely be pedantic to try and find economic causes for all this primitive nonsense."⁹

One reason why history is primarily the record of class struggles rather than the story of technological transformation is that it is the social relations of production, and not the productive forces, which are the basis on which the entire superstructure of institutions and ideologies arise. Political institutions and ideologies are directly expressive of the class struggle, but only indirectly related to and conditioned by the forces of production. Hence, for the purpose of writing political or cultural history, the class struggle rather than labor or technology is the directly relevant principle of explanation and interpretation. The class struggle is the mediator between the material basis of production and the higher institutional and intellectual activities of man which react upon it. As Marx says: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past."¹⁰ Thus dead institutions and ideologies weigh "like a nightmare on the brain of the living." These as well as the more mobile and rapidly expanding forces of production converge upon the social relations of production to limit the ex-

⁹ F. Engels, Letter to Conrad Schmidt, October 17, 1890, Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, tr., D. Torr (New York, 1942), p. 482.

¹⁰ K. Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *Selected Works* (New York, 1933), Vol. II, p. 315.

tent to which men make their own history. According to Engels, the great law of motion of history discovered by Marx is the convergence of forces upon and their transformation by the class struggle. Such is the law according to which "all historical struggles, whether they proceed in the political, religious, philosophical or some other ideological domain, are in fact only the more or less clear expression of struggles of social classes, and . . . [the law that] the existence and thereby the collisions, too, of these classes are in turn conditioned by the degree of development of their economic position, by the mode of their production and by the form of exchange resulting from it."¹¹

It is noteworthy that the four principal dimensions or levels of social life were ordered by Marx and Engels into two counterposing strata: the social structure or material foundation of society; and the superstructure which is built upon this foundation and is explained, in the last analysis, by it. Among the several sources of this classification are Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Two passages in particular are worth quoting:

The sum total of these relations of production constitute the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.¹²

Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence rises an entire superstructure of distinct and characteristically formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations.¹³

From these passages it is clear that the social structure includes both the economic and social conditions of existence, the forces of production, and the division of society into classes; while the superstructure consists not only of legal and political institutions, of which the most important is the state, but of ideologies as well.

Granted that the foundation of Marxian sociology is economic, it is not the economic interpretation of history but the Marxian theory of classes which is the focus of historical materialism. That is be-

¹¹ F. Engels, "Preface to the Third German Edition," *ibid.*, p. 314; insert mine.

¹² Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 11.

¹³ K. Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *op. cit.*, p. 344.

cause it is the only theory of the several forms of societal existence which is directly or immediately related to all. The existence of classes is directly determined by the forces and relations of production and directly determines both the political institutions and ideological thinking of society. Defined in terms of its focal idea, historical materialism is the theory of classes, determined by the mode of production, politically organized, ideologically articulated, and evolved according to dialectical laws.

The Marxian theory of the mode of production, which contains the explanation of surplus value and of the division of society into classes, is a theory of the social structure. Yet it is essentially a theory of classes, although of classes-in-themselves rather than for-themselves. The Marxian theory of class struggle, which lies at the root of political organization and ideological conception, is a theory of the social superstructure. Unlike the former, it is a theory of class consciousness and the institutional and ideological opposition of classes, dominated by the better organized and culturally effective ruling class. Consequently, it is a theory of classes not only for but against themselves. As together these two theories of class unite the structure and superstructure as fundamental parts of historical materialism, it follows that the focal theory and common denominator of Marxian sociology is its theory of classes.

Without arriving at this precise conception of the core of Marxian sociology, Karl Korsch has interpreted it in similar terms. In his book on the sociology of Karl Marx, he notes that: "The objective formula in the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*: 'The history of society is the history of the material production and of the contradictions between the material forces of production and the production-relations which arise and are solved in the course of development' is supplemented by the subjective formula in the *Communist Manifesto*: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is a history of class struggles'."¹⁴ As productive relations in a society dominated by the division of labor imply the existence of classes-in-themselves, the objective side of Marxian sociology is a class theory as much as its subjective theory of class struggle.

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¹⁴ Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* (London, 1938), p. 187.