Historical Materialism

An anti-revolutionary theory of revolution

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Historical materialism is an essential feature not only of the Marxism of the traditional workers movement but also of Marxist-Leninist ideas. A critique of historical materialism explains some of the dreadful aspects of the practice of Marxism-Leninism in power ("actually existing socialism") and thus is part of the answer to the question of how their project turned out to be such a failure from the perspective of the abolition of exploitation and domination.

1. "In Soviet Russia history makes you"

Marxism-Leninism criticises the exploitation of the working class under capitalism. Whereas in this society workers work for the accumulation of wealth of others, in a socialist society workers would work in the interests of their own class. In fact, the whole purpose of production would be the satisfaction of the needs and desires of workers. In Marxist-Leninist theory the working class is considered to be the bearer of the revolution. This is based on the assumed interest of the working class not to be exploited any longer. Inherent to this reasoning is the idea that people make history – in this case those people who are part of the working class. The same reasoning is implied whenever any Marxist group hands out leaflets or holds public meetings, in short when they agitate for their ideas; and this is rightly so.

At the same time, Marxism-Leninism asserts a proposition which opposes this thought. The relations of production determine the interests of people and those relations of production are in turn determined by the productive forces. People do not make history in and by themselves but are determined by (economic) history.

Productive forces express nothing but the productivity of labour, that is the amount of useful things that can be produced in a given time. This productivity can be increased by applying tools and through the knowledge of nature. For example, machines speed-up the production of certain goods or fertilisers can increase the productivity in agricultural production. Yet, tools and knowledge are a means for people; it is people who apply them. How could these tools determine the historical development of the people who apply them? A spade, a tractor, or a computer chip can be used under different social conditions to perform the same, similar or completely different tasks depending on the purposes pursued by those who apply them. These tools or/and the knowledge held concerning their proper application cannot dictate either the ends or the social relations that result between the people who are applying them. Surely, certain technical developments, such as the telephone, make certain social interactions possible, such as long distance real-time conversations; they do provide a choice. But they can never determine the result of this choice. The telephone for instance allows for organisation on a larger scale, but it neither brings about this organisation nor does it determine the purpose of organisation.

The idea that laws of history determine people's behaviour is based on two ideas from Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's writings which are however transformed into two ideas quite different from what they were.

First, in *Capital* Karl Marx showed that in a capitalist society people are subject to economic laws. For example, an increase in the productivity of labour does not benefit the immediate producers but reinforces their separation from the means of subsistence. Moreover, most people are not even aware of these laws, yet their actions follow them. While in such a society even capitalists are subject to economic laws, in previous societies this was different. There the rulers immediately determined many of the social conditions of their time without being subject to

them. If these rulers were subject to conditions then it were conditions imposed by nature or by other people.

Second, both Marx and Engels stated that freedom is not expressed by ignorance towards the laws of nature, but by understanding and applying them for ones own benefit. Instead of ignoring the laws of nature, insight into necessity allows freedom in relationship to nature. One cannot escape the laws of physics – such as gravity – yet one can apply them to send a bunch of people to the Moon; by studying these laws our options increase. Marxism-Leninism takes this last thought and applies it to history rather than nature. The theory claims there are such laws and that freedom would consist in understanding those laws in order to apply them for oneself. However, in a society human beings deal with their own kind and not with nature.4 Exactly those figures which are expected to be mere objects of the laws of history are at the same time assumed to understand and apply these laws – those laws which ostensibly govern their understanding. Their thoughts, interests and aims are determined by laws which they can understand and apply for their own interests and aims. On the one hand, their thoughts are driven by these laws and on the other hand, they apply these laws purposefully.

Marxism-Leninism claims that people must obey the laws of history. At the same time Marxism-Leninism emphasises people must make history. This contradiction is usually resolved towards determinism that people can accelerate progress but cannot change the course of history

2. Half-full, most definitely

With historical materialism Marxism-Leninism constructs a historical teleology. The productive forces (development of technology) produce certain relations of production (social conditions). Those in turn foster or inhibit the development of productive forces, such that the productive forces make people develop interests which lead to a revolution of society. This is how Marxism-Leninism thinks of human progress as a "staircase development" from primitive communism, to slavery, to feudalism, to capitalism, to socialism and finally to communism.6 The same teleology is implied when people refer to some ideas as progressive and others as backward since those words imply a direction of movement, a goal.7 This "scientific optimism" is not scientific at all but optimistic and opportunistic. It is optimistic since one's own success is guaranteed by history independent from one's thoughts and actions. However, a contradiction of optimism is that it is only necessary when faced with a lack of success.

It is opportunist because whatever happens, whatever horrors capitalism manifests; they are good because they lead us one step closer to its abolition. It also appeals to and solicits opportunists because it advertises that one's own project will inevitably succeed and that one is on the winning side. Capitalism's many detrimental effects for so many people are not presented as the most fitting arguments against it but rather the certainty that it will perish. Domination is criticised not because it is powerful and successful but on the contrary because it is ostensibly weak. Yet this logic also works vice versa in that socialism is not envisaged as a sensible society but simply, as inevitably the winning one.

3. Leninism, the highest stage of decadence theory

This view on history has another consequence: a Marxist-Leninist philosopher of history permanently searches for tendencies of capitalist decline. Consequently, crises and wars are not treated as what they are: detrimental or even horrifying realities for masses of people produced by deadlocks in capitalist accumulation and competition among capitalist nation-states. Instead, they are considered to be expressions of the deeper logic that capitalism is about to collapse.Every slaughter is seen as a harbinger of communism and "in the last instance progressive".

The right-wing of the old German social democracy supported even German colonialist expansion and war using a Marxist sounding argument that it would foster the development of capitalism and thus its eventual decline. Similar reasoning led Karl Marx to support the colonial policies of Great Britain.

4. Mission behind enemy lines

The working class is not only at the centre of attention within Marxism-Leninism because it has good reasons to desire the death of capitalism but also because it is given the "great historical mission – to emancipate itself and the whole of the [...] people from political and economic slavery." This expresses a contradictory interest of Marxist-Leninists in the working class. On the one hand, the working class is the bearer of historical progress due to its social nature. On the other hand, if this is the case anyway, why does it have such a mission and who gave it to the working class in the first place? These historically optimistic considerations were common to all Marxist tendencies of the 20th century, from social democrats through to communists. However, these different groupings used to argue in favour of rather disparate tactics. The right-wing of the German Social Democrats (SPD), whose members later constituted the first government of the Weimar republic and who were responsible for murdering left socialists, communists and anarchists, arrived at the following conclusion: if socialism could be taken to be on the verge of arrive automatically, then they could follow a path of reformism within capitalism until the last of days of its existence would come. Against this argument, Rosa Luxemburg made the following more sympathetic but still erroneous point: capitalism will collapse on its own due to its own inherent contradictions, but the workers have to learn how to build socialism. The council communists focused on the trade union movement and thought no political organisation was necessary that would be separated from these workers organisations. If the workers are the bearers of the revolution one only needs to push them where they are organising among themselves if such pushing is needed at all. On the contrary however, for Lenin, the working class on its own only ever develops a trade-unionist consciousness, which means that they only ever demand more wages and better working conditions but that they do not fundamentally opposes the system as a whole.

5. Lenin's Revolutionaries

Thus, Lenin came to the conclusion that the success of the revolution cannot solely rely on the spontaneity of the masses. On the contrary, he considered a cadre organisation of professional revolutionaries to be absolutely crucial. He did not want to adapt the revolutionaries worldview to the masses but to lift the masses to the level of revolutionaries. Lenin held that the organisation

of professional revolutionaries, for which the class background would be irrelevant, must "train the proletariat in steadfast and stubborn struggle". What happens when on the one hand the working class guarantees the revolution by its very existence and yet on the other hand this inherent mission requires instructions and education by the communist party?

6. The question of the party

For Marxism-Leninism not only the proletariat has a historical mission but the party as well: to instruct the workers correctly. The party's work is not justified by the interests of its members but by the historical mission: "On the contrary, this movement imposes the duty upon us; for the spontaneous struggle of the proletariat will not become its genuine 'class struggle' until this struggle is led by a strong organisation of revolutionaries." Thus, it is accepted that many workers do not want the revolution. However, this the Marxist-Leninists do not take seriously in the sense that they then ask what theoretical mistakes underlie the actions which the workers have engaged in and how to critique these actions such that they then move on to become revolutionaries.

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