



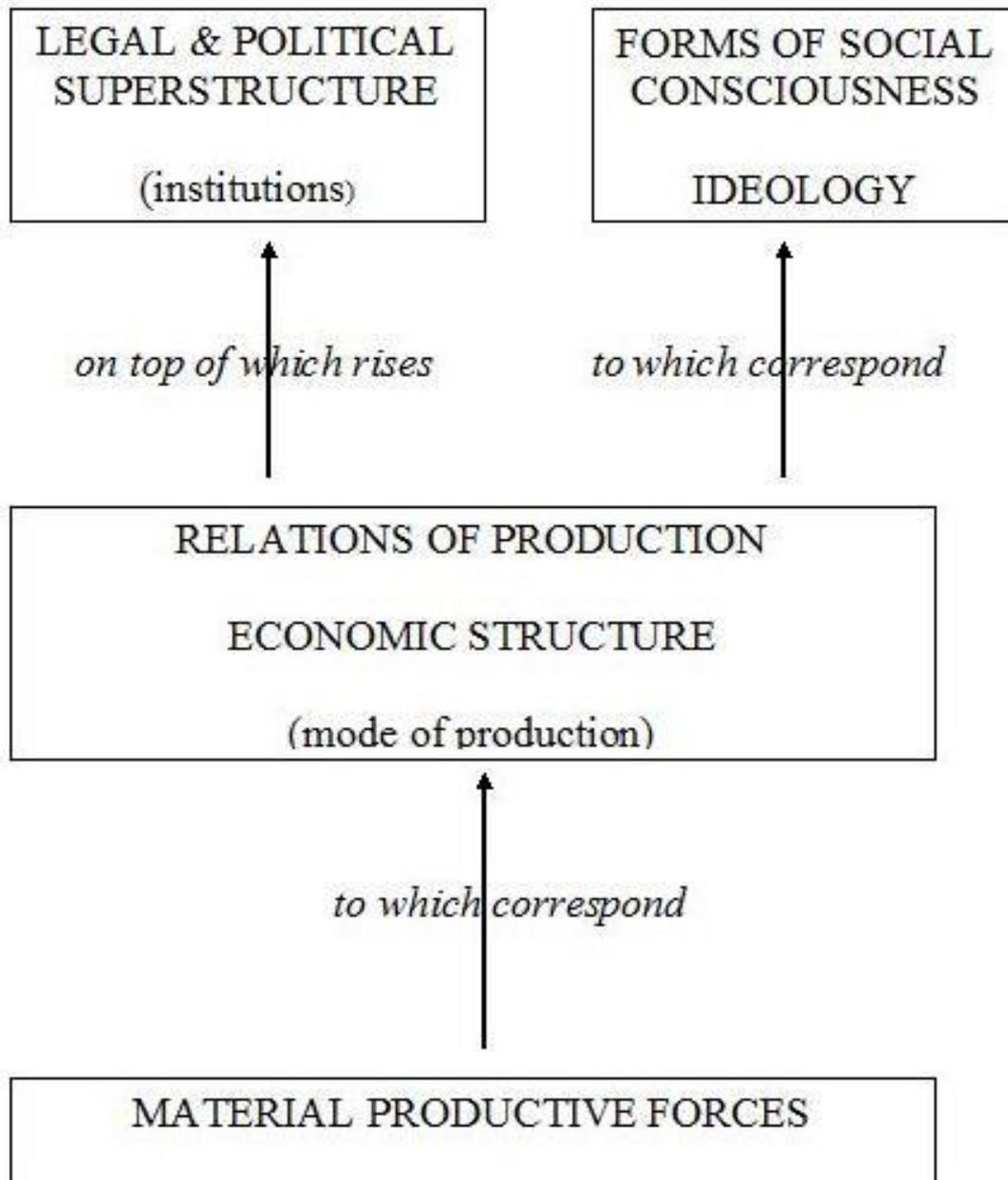
UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

DEPARTMENT FOR
CONTINUING EDUCATION

Philosophy of History

Week 4: Marx's historical materialism

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historical materialism

- ‘Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing their way of earning a living, they change all their social relations. The hand-mill gives us society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist.’ (*The Poverty of Philosophy*, 1847)

historical materialism

- ‘there is continual movement of growth in productive forces’ (*The Poverty of Philosophy*)
- the relations of production start to act as ‘fetters’ on the productive forces (1859, #6)
- ‘Then begins an epoch of social revolution’ (1859, #7)
- ‘Revolutions are the locomotives of history’ (*Class Struggles in France*)

two levels

synchronically

- any *one* time, the character of a human society can be explained by reference to the productive forces that society has as its disposal;

diachronically

- *over* time, different forms of human society emerge, flourish and then disappear in a progressive sequence determined by the growth of productive forces.

historical materialism

- ‘No social formation ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself’ (1859, #11)
- the *obstetric* metaphor (cf. G. A. Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian...*, chapter 4)

questions

1. why is 'there is continual movement of growth in productive forces'?
2. why doesn't the progressive movement of history just keep on going, with new forms of society replacing old ones indefinitely?
3. what's this got to do with communism, which is where Marx thinks history is heading?

answers

1. human beings have always found themselves in conditions of scarcity – consequently, there is always pressure to increase production;
2. ultimately there will be enough to go around – peoples' needs do increase in tandem with production, but in the end they will level off;
3. when production is sufficiently advanced, communism will become possible, and in fact, inevitable.

class division

- ‘The bourgeois relations of production [i.e. capitalism] are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals;’
- ‘at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism.’ (1859, #14)

historical materialism

- ‘The bourgeoisie cannot exist without continually revolutionising the instruments of production’ (*The Communist Manifesto*)
- ‘This social formation [capitalism] brings, therefore, the prehistory of human society to a close.’ (1859, #15)
- historical materialism – a theory of *pre*-history

communism: two aspects

production

- ‘the self-realization of the subject, therefore real freedom [...] is labour’ (*Grundrisse*)

community

- ‘an association, in which the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all’ (*The Communist Manifesto*)

why do we produce things?

because we *want* to

- production as an end in itself
- consequence of human nature
- 'labour [...] the foremost need in life' (CGP)

because we *have* to

- production as a means (to a separate end)
- consequence of the (historical) human situation
- dominant in 'prehistory'

Hegelian character?

similarities

- history develops through struggle and suffering
- in a dialectical fashion
- with a succession of distinct social forms
- ending with a society which resolves the contradictions of the previous forms and in which the human essence is realized

differences

- the end state is yet to come about
- theory meant to serve as a guide to action
- the end of history will in fact be a new beginning
- the teleology is less explicit

- ‘But obviously [alienation] is a merely historical necessity, a necessity for the development of the forces of production solely from a specific historic point of departure, or basis, but in no way an absolute necessity of production; rather, a vanishing one, and the result and the immanent purpose of this process [*das Resultat und der Zweck (immanente) dieses Prozesses*] is to transcend this basis itself, together with this form of the process.’ (*Grundrisse*)

- ‘England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.’ (‘The British Rule in India’)

'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' (1852)

- 1848: French revolution
- 1851: Louis Bonaparte's *coup d'état*
- 'Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.' (§1)

Hegelian aspects

- Revolutionary transitions, whereby one social form gives way to another;
- the role of the ‘world-historical individuals’, in particular their ‘self-delusion’ (§13);
- and their reflexive historicity – ‘resurrection of the dead’ (§14);
- and only properly understood retrospectively (‘Owl of Minerva’).

Why do revolutionaries repeat the past?

- ‘finding once more the spirit of revolution’ (¶4)
- ‘to dull themselves to their own content’ (¶6)
- to delude others into participating
- because burdened and constrained by the past (¶2)

Second paragraph

- ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.’
- Joyce: “ ‘History’, Stephen [Daedelus] said, ‘is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake’ ”

Sixth paragraph

- ‘The social revolution of the nineteenth century’
- ‘let the dead bury the dead’
- ‘creates its poetry from the future’
- ‘There [in previous revolutions] the phrase went beyond the content’
- but with the ‘social revolution’, ‘the content goes beyond the phrase’