

SECTION I: MARX READINGS

part 1

Marx's Vision of History: "Historical Materialism"

This part focuses on the broader conceptual framework, or overall view of history and human nature, that informed Marx's analysis of capitalism. With the help of Engels, Marx formulated this metatheory in his early writings before moving to England and beginning serious work on economic issues. The first three selections are drawn from Marx's and Engels's "Feuerbach" essay, or the first comprehensive statement of their materialist vision of history. Appearing in *The German Ideology* (written in late 1845 and 1846, but not published in full until 1932), this essay states emphatically the central premises of Marx's work: that people "must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history,'" and that consciousness is "a social product." Marx and Engels deployed these simple presuppositions against German philosophy and historiography, which gave primacy to "ideas" or "consciousness" and ignored or understated the role of material factors in political and cultural affairs. Marx's and Engels's counter-argument about the primacy of biological needs (e.g., for food and shelter) does not diminish the importance of sociocultural practices. By contrast, they considered language and other complex social institutions as defining attributes of humanity's distinct "historical being." In their view, sociocultural and historical variations, largely absent among other animals, manifest humanity's unique capacity for linguistically or culturally mediated, and thus highly complex, cooperative productive activities. Most important, Marx's materialism is a *social conception*; its presuppositions oppose the individualistic premises of Adam Smith and other free-market liberals, and provide a basis for a vision of the economy as a socio-cultural complex.

The Feuerbach essay establishes *mode of production* and *class* as central analytical concepts; members of a class share a common location in a mode of production's characteristic types of division of labor and forms of property. Marx and Engels assert that class has an "independent existence as against individuals," influencing substantially a person's "position in

life" and "personal development," regardless of his or her will. Although acknowledging individuality, they hold that individual actions, capacities, and differences are conditioned powerfully by a person's sociocultural contexts. In particular, they imply that class location is the source of fundamental constraints and opportunities that have nearly unavoidable, and even life-defining, consequences for every individual sharing a common position in the class hierarchy. Marx and Engels hold that class exerts a similarly broad determining influence on the rest of sociocultural life. For example, they contend that the *ruling class*, which controls the means of production and its surplus product, dominates intellectually as well as economically and politically. In their view, regulation of the cultural domain by the ruling class may not always be direct or all-encompassing, but it usually exerts substantial influence over the dominant modes of expression (especially in vital political and economic matters) and obscures the role of its own material and class interest. Overall, Marx and Engels considered classes to be the main agents of historical development, shaping sociocultural life through their collective actions and struggles.

Marx's famous preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) summarized briefly the historical materialist concepts that informed his mature analysis of capitalism, and stressed, most centrally, that a society's mode of production determines its *superstructure*, or its ensemble of legal and political institutions and closely related forms of *social consciousness*. Marx also contended that superstructure justifies and perpetuates the material base, but that this functional relationship is eventually upset by technical progress. In his view, class conflicts arise in response to outmoded legal and political institutions and ideologies, which cannot justify or support effectively the emergent productive forces, and thus stunt or "fetter" their development. However, he held that, in the long run, materially based social progress was inevitable, arising from the refinement of productive forces, revolutionary responses to consequent societal contradictions, and emergence of new ruling classes that support the rise of nascent, more advanced modes of production. Marx asserted that capitalism's powerful productive forces and new class dynamics constitute the "last antagonistic" mode of production, and will bring into being an entirely new social formation that will end the human "prehistory" of class domination and extraction. He implies, here, technologically determined, evolutionary progress, which guarantees an emancipatory political outcome. This facet of Marx's historical materialism contradicts its more qualified, historically contingent, sociological side. Some Marxists later fashioned the deterministic aspect of his approach into an orthodox ideology of Communist movements, parties, and regimes (i.e., "dialectical materialism"). This orthodoxy became a focal point of critiques by twentieth-century "critical Marxists" and non-Marxists. In the selection below from the third volume of *Capital*, Marx restates very succinctly and

clearly the core idea of his historical materialism and central analytical theme of his magnum opus: the social mechanisms or institutions whereby "surplus labor is pumped out of direct producers" is the "hidden basis of the entire social structure." But he argued that this fundamental, and almost always ideologically distorted, matter is manifested in "innumerable different historical circumstances." This version of his materialism is still sweeping, but does not offer a warranty for sociopolitical progress. Rather, it suggests a conceptual tool, or heuristic device, to orient empirical inquiry about variable social forms and contingent consequences of extractive relations between dominant classes and direct producers.

The two selections from Engels manifest the contradictory sides of historical materialism. The first portrays Marx's metatheory as a major scientific discovery that returns history to its "real basis" (later Engels claimed that it paralleled the Darwinian revolution in biology). By contrast, the second, Engels's letter to Joseph Bloch, confessed that he and Marx sometimes overstated their approach in heated polemical battles with opponents, and thus were partly to blame for the ahistorical, economic determinism that had arisen among younger "Marxists." Engels argued emphatically that the qualified, sociological version of historical materialism was Marx's real or intended position. However, this tension did not disappear in twentieth-century Marxism, perhaps because it is entwined with Marxist efforts to unify theory and practice, or science and politics. Yet, a similar tension between historically contingent approaches and mechanistic evolutionary progressivism has often appeared in other modern social theories, manifesting broader tensions between social-scientific methods and optimistic hopes about the potentialities of modernity and, especially, of modern science.

chapter 1

Primary Historical Relations, or The Basic Aspects of Social Activity (with Engels) (1845–6)

... the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to “make history”. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life. Even when the sensuous world is reduced to a minimum, to a stick as with Saint Bruno, it presupposes the action of producing this stick. Therefore in any conception of history one has first of all to observe this fundamental fact in all its significance and all its implications and to accord it its due importance. It is well known that the Germans have never done this, and they have never, therefore, had an *earthly* basis for history and consequently never a historian. . . .

The second point is that the satisfaction of the first need, the action of satisfying and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired, leads to new needs; and this creation of new needs is the first historical act. . . .

The third circumstance which, from the very outset, enters into historical development, is that men, who daily re-create their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and woman, parents and children, the *family*. The family, which to begin with is the only social relation, becomes later, when increased needs create new social relations and the increased population new needs, a subordinate one . . . and must then be treated and analysed according to the existing empirical data, not according to “the concept of the family” . . .

These three aspects of social activity are not of course to be taken as three different stages, but just as three aspects or . . . three “moments”,

which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men, and which still assert themselves in history today.

The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation – social in the sense that it denotes the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a “productive force”. Further, that the aggregate of productive forces accessible to men determines the condition of society, hence, the “history of humanity” must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange. . . . Thus it is quite obvious from the start that there exists a materialist connection of men with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production, and which is as old as men themselves. This connection is ever taking on new forms, and thus presents a “history” irrespective of the existence of any political or religious nonsense which would especially hold men together.

Only now, after having considered four moments, four aspects of primary historical relations, do we find that man also possesses “consciousness”. But even from the outset this is not “pure” consciousness. The “mind” is from the outset afflicted with the curse of being “burdened” with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language *is* practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well, and only therefore does it also exist for me; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men. Where there exists a relationship, it exists for me: the animal does not “relate” itself to anything, it does not “relate” itself at all. For the animal its relation to others does not exist as a relation. Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all. Consciousness is at first, of course, merely consciousness concerning the *immediate* sensuous environment and consciousness of the limited connection with other persons and things outside the individual who is growing self-conscious. At the same time it is consciousness of nature, which first confronts men as a completely alien, all-powerful and unassailable force, with which men's relations are purely animal and by which they are overawed like beasts; it is thus a purely animal consciousness of nature (natural religion) precisely because nature is as yet hardly altered by history – on the other hand, it is man's consciousness of the necessity of associating with the individuals around him, the beginning of the consciousness that he is living in society at all. This beginning is as animal as social life itself at this stage. It is mere herd-consciousness, and at this point man is distinguished from sheep only by the fact that

with him consciousness takes the place of instinct or that his instinct is a conscious one. This sheep-like or tribal consciousness receives its further development and extension through increased productivity, the increase of needs, and, what is fundamental to both of these, the increase of population. With these there develops the division of labour, which was originally nothing but the division of labour in the sexual act, then the division of labour which develops spontaneously or "naturally" by virtue of natural predisposition (e.g., physical strength), needs, accidents, etc., etc. Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears. From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of "pure" theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc. But even if this theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc., come into contradiction with the existing relations, this can only occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing productive forces; moreover, in a particular national sphere of relations this can also occur through the contradiction, arising not within the national orbit, but between this national consciousness and the practice of other nations. . . .

Incidentally, it is quite immaterial what consciousness starts to do on its own: out of all this trash we get only the one inference that these three moments, the productive forces, the state of society and consciousness, can and must come into contradiction with one another, because the *division of labour* implies the possibility, nay the fact, that intellectual and material activity, that enjoyment and labour, production and consumption, devolve on different individuals, and that the only possibility of their not coming into contradiction lies in negating in its turn the division of labour. It is self-evident, moreover, that "spectres", "bonds", "the higher being", "concept", "scruple", are merely idealist, speculative, mental expressions, the concepts apparently of the isolated individual, the mere images of very empirical fetters and limitations, within which move the mode of production of life, and the form of intercourse coupled with it. . . .
