

**Lecture 25**  
**Sociology 621**  
**November 30, 2009**

**CRITIQUES & RECONSTRUCTIONS OF CLASSICAL HISTORICAL MATERIALISM**

Many criticisms have been raised against historical materialism, both from outside of the Marxist tradition and from within. Some of these I engage in the sections from my book *Reconstructing Marxism* assigned for this session. What I will do here is briefly list five criticisms. Some of these can be countered fairly effectively, others are more serious. I will not discuss all of these in detail, but focus on a few of these which are a little more complex.

1) *The development thesis*: the forces of production do not have a systematic tendency to develop over time.

2) *Fettering*: There is no general reason why class relations inevitably fetter of forces of production. A good argument may be possible for why a particular kind of class relations have this property, but there is no general argument for why all forms of class relations ultimately do this.

3) *Economic reductionism*: HM is a form of economic reductionism, especially in the explanation of superstructures, and this is illegitimate.

4) *Transformation*: Even if relations do fetter the forces of production, there is no reason to suppose that there will always emerge any historical agents capable of transforming those relations. There is no inherent tendency for Class Capacities sufficient to challenge ruling classes to be generated in conjunction with fettering. Permanent stagnation is possible.

5) *functional explanations*: Functional explanations in social science are not legitimate forms of explanation, both as they apply to the relations of production and to the superstructure.

In light of these criticisms I will offer a less deterministic theoretical goal of historical materialism that retains a general sense of history having an overall, systematic pattern to it, but rejects the strong claims to determinacy implied by classical historical materialism.

**1. Critique of the Development Thesis (skip)**

Joshua Cohen criticizes G.A. Cohen for claiming that there is any inherent tendency for the forces of production to develop. Above all Joshua Cohen emphasizes that while the premises about individual motivations and circumstances adopted by G.A. Cohen may be sound -- that individuals are, among other things, motivated to improve their material situation under conditions of scarcity -- there is no reason to imagine that this individual motivation is universally translated into an *interest* in the development of the forces of production. There are many other ways of enhancing material welfare: conquest, increasing exploitation, etc. "Blockages" of the development of the forces of production, therefore, will not be pathological

and the systematic development of the forces of production will be much more contingent upon specific institutional arrangements.

**Response:** In order to respond to J. Cohen's arguments, a weaker version of the development thesis needs to be adopted. Rather than positing an *inherent drive* for the forces of production to advance, a softer claim can be made:

*the probability of development of the forces of production is greater than the probability of their regression.*

Note that this does not imply that for some given period of time the probability of development is greater than the probability of stagnation. Suppose 10,000 years ago that in a 100-year period the probability of a significant development of the forces of production -- a development which significantly affect productivity -- is .1 and the probability of stagnation .9 (forgetting for the moment the probability of regression). This means in two successive 100 year periods the probability of stagnation is .81, in four successive centuries .35, in 1000 years .01, in 4000 years. So, the probabilities are extremely high that at least once in every 4000 years there will be some significant advance in the forces of production even if in any given century the probability is only .1. So long as the probability of development is greater than the probability of regression (so this will not have an equal or greater chance of being undone), there will be a sticky downward tendency for the forces of production to develop. *This sticky downward quality, I think, is all that is needed for the forces of production to have a directionality to them.*

## 2. Inevitability of fettering of forces of production

The pivotal argument in HM is that in all modes of production based on class relations, eventually the relations of production fetter the forces of production. But why should we believe this as a general, law-like proposition? This may be true for a particular type of relations of production like feudalism, but why should we believe this is always true? Neither Marx nor Cohen offer a generic argument for this. The most one can say is this:

In class societies the relations of production create powerful classes with interests in the status quo. They defend superstructures which preserve those relations of production and thus create a certain kind of social rigidity. This rigidity itself may tend to become a fetter, since the relations of production are unlikely to adjust flexibly to new conditions.

But is this credible? In fact this is precisely what capitalism has accomplished: incredible flexibility in its own institutional transformations.

Cohen's proposal of use-fettering is a reasonable response: the plausibility of alternatives to capitalism comes not from the an absolute fettering of development of the PF which might make capitalism unsustainable but from its deepening irrationality. The core idea here is this: capitalism creates a world of unbelievable productivity, yet perpetuates toil and poverty on a massive scale. The gap between the kinds of lives *we could live* because of our productiveness and the *lives we do live* because of the capitalist organization of this productivity is the

fundamental irrationality of the system: eliminable human suffering and alienation in a world capable of sustaining human emancipation.

But irrationality – unfortunately -- generates much weaker predictions about the future: at most we may have a theory of capitalism's futures.

### 3. Economic Reductionism: critique of the theory of the superstructure

Probably the most common critique of historical materialism is that it is an example of economic reductionism or economic determinism (or class reductionism or technological reductionism depending upon precisely what is the context of the discussion). Sometimes this criticism comes from the simple intuition that the world is much more complex than is mapped by historical materialism. This, however, is not a cogent criticism by itself: historical materialism would not be a good theory if it was as complex as the world. The whole point of theory construction is to radically simplify the complexities of the world in order to explain the underlying patterns and mechanisms.

More to the point, however, the criticism of reductionism suggests that *important features of society are not determined at all by the processes mapped in historical materialism*, or at least much less shaped by the dynamics postulated within historical materialism than by other autonomous mechanisms. The most notable form of this criticism in recent years has come from feminists who argue powerfully that the form of gender relations cannot be explained by the dialectic of forces and relations of production, but the same arguments can be raised about many other aspects of social relations: nationality, ethnicity, etc.

**Response:** G.A. Cohen has responded to this kind of criticism by arguing for restricted instead of inclusive historical materialism. The intuition behind this distinction comes from the obvious fact that no defender of historical materialism ever believed that the dynamics in the theory were capable of explaining every feature of institutions in the “superstructure.” As Cohen points out, the fine grained details of religious practices -- that there are exactly 39 articles in the creed of the Church of England rather than 38 or 37, for example -- probably cannot be explained by the arguments of historical materialism. Historical materialism is meant to explain the “most important” features of religion, not such “irrelevant” details. The problem, of course, is in giving a nonarbitrary meaning to “most important” and “irrelevant”. Why is the number of articles in a creed “unimportant”? It is certainly possible, for example, that some things may be of extreme symbolic importance to the members of a religion and yet of no explanatory importance whatsoever for the development of the forces of production or the stability of the relations of production.

**Restricted** historical materialism tries to provide a criterion for what it is that defines the “relevance” of a property for historical materialist explanations, namely:

*historical materialism explains those properties of noneconomic institutions that are consequential for stabilizing the relations of production.*

The explanandum in the base-superstructure argument is thus **not** all noneconomic phenomena, but only those noneconomic phenomena which have significant effects on reproducing or strengthening the economic structure of society. These -- the argument goes -- are to be explained by the productive relations themselves. Let me give a specific example which Cohen uses to illustrate the nontrivial quality of these claims.

*Illustration from the Protestant Ethic & the Spirit of Capitalism:* One of the most celebrated arguments in sociology is Weber's claim that the religious doctrines of Calvinism played a crucial role in generating capitalism. The argument should be familiar: Calvinism postulates a radical form of predestination: you are saved or damned by God's will alone. This created great psychological anxiety in people because of the fear of damnation. Being economically successful in this world was then taken as a sign that you were saved. Orienting ones behavior towards such signs, therefore, was a practical response to the religious anxiety generated by the doctrine. This in turn helped to promote capitalism.

As Weber framed the problem, this explanation contradicts the base/superstructure thesis of historical materialism:

while it is true that the religious doctrine significantly strengthens the productive relations of capitalism, it is false that the doctrine is functionally explained by this fact. Capitalism, in a sense, is a contingent byproduct of a religious practice that was generated by entirely different dynamics, dynamics lodged in the internal development of Christianity in the reformation.

Cohen offers an alternative account, based on recent scholarship on the sermons of Calvin: Weber based his interpretation on the basis of the mature writings of John Calvin as they appeared in published sermons. If one looks very closely at the texts of his sermons from the very beginning one observes that initially the themes of predestination and worldly asceticism were not very prominent. Only gradually over the years of his preaching to the urban burghers of Geneva did these themes become prominent. One could argue, then, that these themes emerged and developed in the doctrine precisely because they were well received by actors who were in the process of forming and elaborating capitalist relations. Calvin was a preacher. Some Sundays his sermons would have been very well received, other times less well received. He would have introspectively thought about what worked, what didn't, what resonated, what didn't. The developed form of what we call "Calvinism" or the "Protestant Ethic", therefore, emerged and consolidated because it served the function of rationalizing the practices of actors in this way. If this is correct, this would be consistent with restricted historical materialism.

RHM is still an ambitious theoretical claim, but far more restrictive than the claim that historical materialism explains everything. A nonreductionist account of gender, culture, race, nationality, etc. can then be combined with a materialist explanation of those properties of each of these which are most systematically functional for the reproduction of the relations of production. In such a combination there is no necessary implication that the functional aspects are in fact the most important for understanding the overall character of gender or anything else.

#### 4. Transformation

A central element of the General Theory of History in historical materialism is that when a particular class structure fetters the development of the productive forces – when long term stagnation sets in – those relations will be transformed into more suitable relations of production. Such transformation requires an historical agent, a collective actor capable of challenging the dominant class of the existing social structure. While it may be that there are plausible arguments for capitalism that such an agent will be generated by the contradictions of capitalism, there is no reason to believe that this should be true across all possible class structures. There are several problems here. It may be that we can say that whenever stagnation sets in that there will be people with strong interests in overthrowing the existing ruling class: fettering is bad for significant portions of the population and so they have an interest in change. But it is not the case that interests by themselves generate capacities for struggle. This means that permanent stagnation, permanent fettering, is conceivable.

#### 5. Functional Explanation

Historical materialism as elaborated in Marx's work requires functional explanations. This is most obvious in the base/superstructure model, which is replete with functional explanations. Take the example of the relationship between legal rights and economic powers: the powers would be empty without legal rights, so it seems like legal rights in the superstructure explain economic powers in the base. Only by interpreting this relationship as part of a functional explanation can the base be understood as having causal primacy over the superstructure. More subtly it is the case for the forces/relations of production dialectic as well.

If a functional explanation is correct, then there must exist some sort of underlying mechanism -- sometimes called a "feedback mechanism" -- which explains how it comes to pass that the structure is reproduced by virtue of its beneficial effects. In the case of functional explanations in biology, Darwinian natural selection constitutes the core of such mechanisms. Cohen argues that an elaboration of such mechanisms is certainly useful in defending a functional explanation and is ultimately important for the theory within which the functional explanation figures to be complete. But he insists that a specification of such mechanisms is not logically necessary for believing a functional explanation to be valid.

#### The critique of functional explanations

Cohen's book launched a vigorous debate over the problem of functional explanation in general, and functional explanation in Marxism in particular. Most of the themes in this debate appeared earlier in the many debates over the functionalism in the work of Talcott Parsons and others a generation earlier. But there were new twists because of the Marxian context of the discussion.

There are three kinds of critiques of functional explanations that I want to stress here: first, Elster's critique that social functional explanations generally fail because they lack any coherent account of underlying mechanisms; second, the critique that functional explanations tend to unrealistically assume that functionally explained outcomes are optimal for the system in

question; and third, functional explanations tend to minimize the possibility of intrinsic contradictions within the functional adaptations of a system.

### **Critique #1: The problem of underlying mechanisms**

Perhaps the leading figure in the recent critique of Marxian functional explanations is Jon Elster. He argued that the search for functional explanations in social science reflected a kind of theological impulse -- searching for some kind of ultimate purpose in social arrangements. In earlier times, such a search for purpose existed in the physical sciences as well. People wanted to know "what is the purpose of the sun?" and the answer was found in its beneficial effects to humankind -- the purpose of the sun to warm us. The mechanism behind this functional account was theological: the sun exists and has these beneficial effects because God so willed it.

The heart of Elster's argument against functional explanations concerns the distinction between intentional and functional explanations:

- in **intentional explanations**, a social phenomenon is explained by its *anticipated* consequences in the minds of the actors;
- in **functional explanations** it is explained by its *actual* consequences.

A legitimate example of a functional explanation in social science, Elster maintains, is the explanation for why capitalist firms tend to follow profit-maximizing strategies in the market. Regardless of the intentions of owners of firms, it is the actual consequences of their strategies which determines the likelihood of the firm surviving over time, because of the power of the firm-killing mechanism of competition, even if individual capitalists randomly adopted particular strategies, the strategies which would be empirically found in a population of firms would tend to be profit maximizing. The profit-maximizing intentions of capitalists may improve the speed with which this distribution of strategies is generated among firms, but it is not essential for the explanation.

Elster's main point of criticism of functional explanations in social science is that in most such explanations it is impossible to construct the kind of plausible mechanisms found in the example of profit-maximizing firms. At a minimum this is a criticism of sloppy explanatory practice, positing functional explanations with no heed to the plausibility of mechanisms. More generally it reflects the use of a functional idiom to hide explanations based on implausible intentional explanations (especially conspiracies). When superstructures are functionally explained by their benefits to capitalism, lurking behind the explanation is a conspiracy of a class conscious, farsighted bourgeoisie which imposes its will on the state. If indeed this is the nature of the real explanation, then it should be articulated in this form and subjected to appropriate empirical scrutiny, but not framed as a functional explanation in which superstructures automatically adjust to the functional requirements of the economic base.

The central problem with functional explanations in social science is that *most functional arrangements in society could never have emerged simply as nonintentional functional adaptations*. The key property of intentionality is the ability to anticipate several steps into the

future. This allows for rational intentional actors to take one step backwards, two steps forward. Functional adaptations operating behind the backs of actors cannot traverse such a trajectory, since the initial one step backwards makes the structure in question less beneficial than initially. Revolutions, transformations of social relations, large scale institution building, always involve costs; thus the adaptations cannot be explained purely functionally.

The result of all this is that functional explanations are in general unlikely to be persuasive. In the specific case of historical materialism, moreover, the pivotal functional relation -- that the relations of production are the way they are because they further the development of the forces of production -- is particularly lacking in plausibility. Until some credible mechanism is postulated which could account for the selection of optimal new relations of production under conditions of fettering by old relations of production, there is no reason to believe the theory.

### **Response:**

In order for Cohen's functional arguments to be complete, something like a Darwinian or Lamarckian mechanism has to be postulated. (Lamarck proposed an alternative mechanism for biological evolution than Darwin: animals modified their fitness by acquiring adaptive traits -- eg. by stretching their necks through effort -- and these acquired traits were then passed on to offspring. The selection process, in a sense, operates on the traits themselves). In a Darwinian mechanism there has to be something which differentially kills off societies with fettering relations of production or institutions that are dysfunctional for the base; in a Lamarckian mechanism there needs to be a process which would modify particular features of the relations of production within a society when the forces of production are fettered or modifies particular aspects of institutions when they become destabilizing (i.e. a mechanism which selects directly on the nonadaptive traits rather than on the society or institution as a whole).

Elster admits that there are special cases where this kind of process works in social science, most notably in the case of market competition. But he insists that for most of the problems addressed by historical materialism, the explanation fails because the explanation of institutional adaptation and change necessarily involves conscious intentionality.

I think this is an arbitrary and misleading restriction on the structure of explanations needed in social science. While it is certainly true that much institutional adaptations and change involve conscious deliberation and intentionality -- the anticipated effects of the change help explain why people execute the change -- *whether or not a given change becomes consolidated and deeply institutionalized depends, in significant ways, on its actual effects, not simply its prior anticipated effects*. Human intentionality and intelligence plays a crucial role in this process of functional adjustment: when things are going badly, when interests are threatened, when ruling classes feel threatened, they seek solutions and try to modify institutions. In Elster's view, if they randomly changed institutions and kept doing so until conditions improved, this would count as a functional explanation. This would obviously be an extremely inefficient process for reproducing social relations. The fact that people use their intelligence to do some preliminary filtering of changes does not seem to me grounds for describing the resulting changes and configurations as entirely the product of intentionality. To use Elster's favorite example: the fact that capitalists do not randomly adopt business strategies does not destroy the functional explanation for the

tendency for profit maximizing strategies to occur; the deliberate search for such strategies just means that the selection process will be more efficient.

### **Critique #2: Against optimality assumptions**

The sheer fact that HM uses functional explanations is thus not a basis for its indictment. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the specific functional explanations proposed in HM are convincing. In particular, the idea that functional explanations imply optimal functionality seems implausible. That is, as formulated by Cohen, historical materialism's functional explanation states that the relations of production that exist do so because, of all possible relations of production, they are the relations that best further the development of the forces of production. Similarly, the institutional features of the superstructure exist/persist because, of all possible institutional properties, they best reproduce the economic base. This seems quite implausible. [But note: it is implausible for biology as well. As Steven Jay Gould has argued, there are countless properties of animals which are suboptimal, less than perfect adaptations. If some other mutation had occurred the animal might be "fitter" than they actually are. Natural selection only posits a device of selecting between alternatives that happen to occur -- a property which enhances fitness relative to another is likely to prevail, but a third property, if it were to occur, might have been even better, and it may be entirely contingent that the third property failed to occur.]

This suggests that the simple functional explanations of historical materialism should be replaced by two somewhat less deterministic forms of functional explanation:

*1. functional compatibility:* institutional properties are the way they are because, at a minimum, they allow for the reproduction of the class structure; the relations of production are the way they are because they allow for the development of the forces of production. An explanation invoking functional compatibility implies that there is a kind of *negative selection* at work: dysfunctional properties set in motion a set of pressures which increase the probabilities that they will be abandoned or transformed. Where more than one functionally compatible option exists (in the sense of being historically available), which one is adopted will depend upon contingent historical facts.

*2. functional superiority:* where two institutional alternatives are historically possible and one more effectively reproduces the economic base than the other, there will be a *tendency* for the functionally superior institutional alternative to prevail. Where two forms of relations of production are historically possible and one more effectively encourages the development of the forces of production, there will be a tendency for the functionally superior relations of production to prevail. "Tendency" means that, all other things being equal, the probability of the superior solution occurring is greater than the inferior one.

The second kind of explanation stresses the fact that the selection of a functionally superior alternative is only a tendency; the first kind of explanation indicates that contingent factors will determine which alternative is actually selected among functionally compatible possibilities.



If we replace functional-optimality explanations with these two quasi-functional explanations, we get a much less rigidly deterministic, more probabilistic theory of historical trajectories, variations of social forms within historical epochs, and superstructural institutions. In each case there is greater scope for contingency, for the effects of historically specific structural factors and conditions. To understand such factors requires, I would argue, *sociological materialism*, not simply historical materialism. That is, to understand how the specific social structural conditions of production in a given society make certain options easier or more difficult to achieve.

### **Critique #3: Contradictory functionality**

Even if we drop claims to “optimality”, functional compatibility still seems to suggest that the institutions that make up the superstructure all fit nicely together to create a smoothly functioning system, a system within which all of the parts are “compatible.” Even if this does not imply the best of all possible arrangements from the point of view of system-reproduction, it still seems to suggest that the parts of the system all work harmoniously together.

As we will see when we discuss the state and ideology, I think this assumption should be dropped. Rather than seeing capitalist society as a tightly intergated system of coherent elements, with a coherent superstructure smoothly reproducing the base, it is better to see society as a loosely coupled system, more of a patchwork of institutional elements in which it is a variable property of the system the extent to which the parts function harmoniously. This opens the possibility of seeing systematically contradictory features of institutional arrangements -- not just haphazard institutional failures, but genuine, contradictions within the state, ideology, law and other aspects of the “superstructure.”

## **5. Where does this leave us?**

Let’s try to remember where we started and what the point is of all of this meandering engagement with a theory of history. Historical materialism helped solve a particular problem for Marxism: Marxism is an attempt at building a social scientific theory of class emancipation. It is grounded in a critique of a powerful dimension of oppression in capitalist society -- class-based exploitation and domination -- and, as an emancipatory theory, envisions the possibility of a world within which this form of oppression is eliminated. For many people, no matter how abhorrent they find class inequality, this may seem pie-in-the-sky, a messianic fantasy rather than an objective around which collective struggles can be organized.

*Historical materialism provided a compelling theory of this future to capitalism. The theory of the past epochs of human history added credibility to the basic claims by showing that past forms of class domination were overthrown once they had exhausted their capacity for material development. The specific theory of capitalist development attempted to show that for capitalism, as well, it was the case that eventually it would exhaust its capacity for such development. Taken together, these lent great force to the political project of struggling for the radical transformation of capitalism.*

If the arguments we have reviewed are correct, then this perspective on the future of capitalism -- the materialist theory of the history of the future -- has to be significantly modified. We no longer have a credible theory of the inevitability of the demise of capitalism and we really only have a sketch of a theory of its possible futures. What we have is this:

1. There is a “sticky-downward” tendency for the forces of production to develop in history. The development of the forces of production will therefore tend to have a cumulative, directional character. This suggests that history has a weak directionality and historical reversal is unlikely.
2. Different forms of relations of production are functionally compatible with different levels of development of the forces of production. That is, a given set of productive forces can be productively deployed only under certain forms of production relations.
3. Taken together, this is the basis of fairly compelling theory of the trajectory of epochal history that culminates in capitalism, although there is a possibility of very long term, perhaps indefinite, stagnation under certain kinds of class relations.
4. But this does not give us what we really want: a compelling theory of capitalism's future.
5. However, we do have a powerful critique of capitalism rooted in the theory of exploitation and emancipatory potential resulting from the incredible productivity capitalism has created.
6. And we do have basic elements of a powerful theory of the contradictory institutional impediments to the realization of that emancipatory potential within capitalism – the theory of the state and ideology.
7. And these in turn can form the basis for creative thinking about how to take advantage of those contradictions for the advancement of the emancipatory project.