

Marx's Historical Materialism—a very short summary Philosophy 166

(with thanks to G. A. Cohen's interpretive work)

1. The productive forces tend to develop throughout history.

(The productive forces are the means available for transforming nature to satisfy human wants. Raw materials, tools, labor power, technological knowledge about how to produce goods with various inputs, are all examples of productive forces.)

2. The nature of the productive relations of a given society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces (to a far greater extent than the reverse).

(The productive relations are relations involving people and control of productive forces. Examples: The capitalist hires workers. The boss owns the factory. The serfs born on a feudal manor are required by enforced custom to remain there and work sometimes for the benefit of the lord of the manor. As Marx states in the 1859 "Preface to the Critique of Political Economy," "The sum total of these relations of production [in a given society] constitutes the economic structure of society.")

The explanatory relation involved here is functional explanation. Example: An anthropologist might claim that the fact that the practice of rain dance rituals fosters or is functional for social cohesion explains the presence of rain dance rituals in a given society. To complete a functional explanation, the anthropologist needs to cite a causal mechanism that leads from being functional to being established in society. The anthropologist might observe that a social elite that desires social cohesion might see that rain dance rituals would foster social cohesion and act deliberately to install the practice. An auxiliary cause might be that what promotes social cohesion tends to make ordinary people happy and ordinary people, seeing (perhaps dimly) that rain dance rituals are linked to their happiness in this way, support the continuance of the practice.

Here there are two cases to consider.

In a stable society, the productive relations are as they are because they are well adapted to utilizing effectively the existing productive forces and promoting their further growth.

In an unstable society, productive relations are as they are because they were well adapted to a past level of productive forces.

3. The character of the noneconomic institutions of society, especially its political-legal order, is explained by the character of its economic structure (to a far greater degree than the reverse).

4. The development of the productive forces periodically produces conflict between forces and relations. At these times the existing productive relations are fetters on the forces—the former hinder the effective utilization and further growth of the latter. A time of social instability ensues. The outcome in the long run is that the existing relations of production adjust to the new forces of production rather than the other way round.

5. "All history is the history of class struggle." The class that wins the class struggle is the one that in its time is best able to preside over the productive

forces. That is, the class that wins is the one that is best able to bring it about that the productive forces are for the reasonably foreseeable future effectively utilized and that their further growth is encouraged.

A toy example (introduced by G. A. Cohen) that illustrates Marx's idea of growth in productive forces leading to conflict between forces of production and existing relations of production and then to adjustment of these relations to the new forces. Imagine a simple society in which the economy consists of ferrying material in boats. Initially the basic means of production are rowboats. These boats are most efficiently rowed by two persons per boat, and relations of production have grown up that efficiently utilize this rowboat technology. Boats are owned by two-person partnerships and an ideology of nautical cooperation ("Be faithful to your partner!", "Only a fool ferries alone," develops and becomes socially established.

Then canoes are invented. The new canoe technology is superior to the old rowboat technology. You can ferry more goods faster in canoes than in rowboats. Canoes are most efficiently used by a single paddler, but even with two paddlers are canoe, the paddlers with canoe are more economically productive than two rowers operating a rowboat. The new technology is in conflict with the existing relations of production and the ideological superstructure (the nautical cooperation ethos) that supports it. There is social conflict. Perhaps initially the new technology is resisted by those loyal to the rowboat way of life. Perhaps for a time the new canoes are adopted, but used inefficiently, with two paddlers per canoe rather than one. Marx's theory or history predicts that in such a situation, the long run equilibrium is that the new better technology is adopted, the relations of production best suited to that new technology are embraced, and the cultural and ideological superstructure adjusts to the new ways. Changes in the productive forces are a more powerful cause of change and stability in the relations of production and the supporting legal and political and cultural order than the relations and allied superstructure are a cause of changes and stability in the productive forces.

The historical materialism story may make it sound as though technological change has a magical causal power. This is not Marx's idea. The underlying driving force is the claimed fact that people are rational to a considerable extent. They seek effective means to satisfy their wants and being smart, find ever better means and adopt better means adopted by others. This fact of rationality leads to inventions and the tendency to growth of the productive forces. When economic changes induce social conflict, the class that can more effectively harness the productive forces can offer better deals to more potential supporters than rival classes tied to less efficient ways of conducting economic life. People see that on the whole and on the average they (most of them) have better chances of a good life if they go with the economically more progressive social group when social groups are vying for allegiance and seeking to become socially dominant. Rationality (imperfect but considerable) is possessed by members of social elites and would-be social elites and members of subordinate social groups as well.

Next question: Given all of the above, why does Marx think that "the bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production" and that "This [bourgeois] social formation brings, therefore, the prehistory of human society to a close"?