

<https://gegen-kapital-und-nation.org/en/historical-materialism/>

# Historical Materialism – an anti-revolutionary theory of revolution

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. <sup>1</sup> 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 <sup>2</sup>, 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 <sup>3</sup> stated that freedom is not expressed by ignorance towards the laws of nature, but by understanding and applying them for one's 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. <sup>4</sup> 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 <sup>5</sup>. 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup>

This “scientific optimism” is not scientific at all but optimistic and opportunistic. It is optimistic since one's own success is guaranteed by history <sup>8</sup> 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 <sup>9</sup>.

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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup>

### **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.” <sup>13</sup>

This expresses a contradictory interest if 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? <sup>14</sup>

These historically optimistic considerations were common to all Marxist tendencies of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 oppose 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 <sup>15</sup>, must “train the proletariat in steadfast and stubborn struggle” <sup>16</sup>.

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.” <sup>17</sup>

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. <sup>18</sup>

One explanation by Marxist-Leninists – for the fact that workers do not behave the way expected by the communist parties – is that they have been instructed by the wrong people, that they have been seduced by the wrong suitors. One variant of this seduction narrative is that they have been bribed (“worker aristocrats”) or else that demagogues from social democrats through to fascists have confused them.

Another, contrary explanation of many Marxist-Leninists is that the time is not right yet for revolution. The professional revolutionary has the responsibility to study history and the current

conditions in order to establish when it is the right moment for revolution thanks to his scientific insight into the laws of history. Among Marxist-Leninists a big debate once took place about what revolutionaries ought to do in the meantime; and the faction that prevailed opted for social democratic reforms and support for workers interests within rather than outside of capitalism.

But even after their revolution, in the Soviet Union, workers did not behave as the Marxist-Leninists expected, since their order was objectively not in the interest of those working class people. In order to explain this, two conclusions were drawn which were obvious and common:

First, claimed the Soviet Marxist-Leninists, there was still a reactionary, petty bourgeois consciousness present among the population. Thus the population was to blame. This blame was then in a second step taken back to some extent: this wrong consciousness was only still present because the party had failed in its task of instructing the workers and/or at studying the laws of history.

Against the common idea that critique was banned in real socialist countries it is necessary to point out that critique and self-critique were permanently exercised there, including party purges as one of its special forms. What deserves critique is the content and end of this critique and self-critique which was hostile towards a rational project. The Marxist-Leninists did not demonstrate to their comrades which mistakes they made and did not argue using the forceless force of the better argument. Instead, all different opinions were placed under suspicion not only as being potentially wrong but also as being – relative to the moralistic historical mission – evil in the sense of being absolutely treacherous.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> While for Marxism-Leninism productive forces include all factors which are relevant for the purposeful interaction of humans with nature, the relations of production are determined by the way humans relate to each other in production and distribution. Marxism-Leninism also speaks of a mode of production which is the unity of productive forces and relations of production. These categories were inspired by Karl Marx who wrote in the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859: “In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production.” See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> This fact was often ignored by Marxist-Leninists.
- <sup>3</sup> “Freedom does not consist in any dreamt-of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends.” Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 1877, see <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch09.htm>.
- <sup>4</sup> There are also passages of Marx and Engels which posit a law that history will lead to communism. Those deserve critique just as well. Some Marxist critics of Leninism such as the SPGB share this misconception with it: “Thus the dialectical materialism of Marx is simply the science of the universal laws of motion and evolution in nature, human society and thought.” (SPGB Executive Committee, *Historical Materialism*, 1975, <http://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/pdf/hm.pdf>, emphasis added)
- <sup>5</sup> A thing, process or action is teleological when it is for the sake of an end, i.e., a ?????: (end, purpose) or final cause.
- <sup>6</sup> While Marx sometimes wrote about history in a teleological way, Marxism-Leninism revised his views and erased the “Asiatic mode of production” from its account since it does

not conform to their straight staircase model, cf. Karl Marx, Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, 1859. It should also be noted that in Part 4: The production of relative surplus-value of Capital, Volume 1, Karl Marx describes how the social relations of production (the capitalist mode of production) revolutionise the technological development (the development of big machinery) which does not fit into the technological deterministic worldview of Marxism-Leninism (cf. Derek Sayer, The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytic Foundations of Historical Materialism, Chapter 2, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/en/sayer1.htm>)

- [7](#) Even for pessimists like Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer it is possible to claim a teleology of history. In the the Dialectic of Enlightenment they wrote: “Now that power [“Herrschaft” (domination) in the German original] is no longer necessary for economic reasons, the Jews are designated as its absolute object” (Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, Stanford University Press 2002, pp.137). The two most well-known authors of the Frankfurt School held that domination was once a necessity but that it survived its best before date. However, instead of communism an administered world came about, with fascism being the most obvious expression. After this historic moment, the bourgeoisie “was [...] advancing ineluctably toward a reversion to pure oppression ...” (ibid., pp.138, emphasis added) This new phase they called “late capitalism” in which rackets and monopolies had replaced the law of value and the market. This notion is informed by Friedrich Pollock's analysis which is based on historical materialism (cf. Moishe Postone and Barbara Brick, Critical Theory and the Limits of Traditional Marxism in Theory and Society, Vol. 11, No. 5 (Sep., 1982), pp. 617-658).
- [8](#) Again, this is no monopoly of Marxism-Leninism. For example, in Endnotes #2, Misery and the Value Form the article Crisis in the ClassRelation describes the production of surplus population under capitalism. The article concludes: “With its own reproduction at stake, the proletariat cannot but struggle, and it is this reproduction itself that becomes the content of its struggles. As the wage form loses its centrality in mediating social reproduction, capitalist production itself appears increasingly superfluous to the proletariat: it is that which makes us proletarians, and then abandons us here. In such circumstances the horizon appears as one of communisation; of directly taking measures to halt the movement of the value form and reproduce ourselves without capital.” The horrors produced by capitalism force the proletariat to bring about the kind of revolution the authors appreciate. See <http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/2>.
- [9](#) The council communist Anton Pannekoek picked up on this: “The theory of the economic catastrophe is thus ready-made for intellectuals who recognise the untenable character of capitalism and who want a planned economy to be built by capable economists and leaders. And it must be expected that many other such theories will come from these quarters or meet with approval there. The theory of the necessary collapse will also be able to exercise a certain attraction over revolutionary workers. They see the overwhelming majority of the proletarian masses still attached to the old organisations, the old leaders, the old methods, blind to the task which the new development imposes on them, passive and immobile, with no signs of revolutionary energy. The few revolutionaries who understand the new development might well wish on the stupefied masses a good economic catastrophe so that they finally come out of the slumber and enter into action. The theory according to which capitalism has today entered its final crisis also provides a decisive, and simple, refutation of reformism and all Party programmes which give priority to parliamentary work and trade union action — a demonstration of the necessity of revolutionary tactics which is so convenient that it must be greeted sympathetically by revolutionary groups.” (Anton Pannekoek, The theory of the collapse of capitalism in Capital and Class, 1977, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1934/collapse.htm>)



- [10](#) It should be noted that the theory of decadence, i.e. that capitalism outlived its “best before” date, is not limited to those who believe in historical materialism. The German “value-critical” group “krisis” for example writes in its well-known Manifesto against Labour: “A corpse rules society – the corpse of labour ... The society ruled by labour does not experience any temporary crisis; it encounters its absolute limit.” (<http://www.krisis.org/1999/manifesto-against-labour>) Leaving aside the discussion whether their account of capitalism as a “society ruled by labour” is adequate, they clearly expect capitalism to fail by its own standards.
- [11](#) Of course, this critique does not imply that capitalism cannot collapse. Assuming it will due to universal laws of movement however unfounded. As with any other argument, theories of collapse have to be examined in their own right. Lenin's theory is criticised for instance in <http://www.ruthlesscriticism.com/lenin.htm>.
- [12](#) “England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia.” Karl Marx, The Future Results of British Rule in India, 1853, MECW Volume 12, pp. 217, see <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/07/22.htm>.
- [13](#) Lenin, The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement, Lenin Collected Works, 1964, Volume 4, pp. 366-371. Again, this idea was originally put forward by Friedrich Engels: “To accomplish this act of universal emancipation is the historical mission of the modern proletariat.” (Friedrich Engels, Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, 1880, Marx/Engels Selected Works, Volume 3, pp. 95-151, See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/ch03.htm>)
- [14](#) The writer Bertolt Brecht criticised the historical mission of the working class through the character Kalle in the play Talk of Refugees: „I always objected against the mission, instinctively so to speak. It sounds flattering, but the flatterers I always distrust, don't you? [...] They imagine an ideal state and we ought to establish it. We are the operators, they remain the leaders, eh? We shall save humanity, but who is that?”(Bertolt Brecht, Flüchtlingsgespräche. Frankfurt a. M. 2000, pp. 61f., our translation)
- [15](#) “In view of this common characteristic of the members of such an organisation, all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals, not to speak of distinctions of trade and profession, in both categories, must be effaced.” (Lenin, What is to be Done?, 1902, Lenin's Selected Works, Volume 1, pp. 119 - 271)
- [16](#) *ibid.*
- [17](#) *ibid.*
- [18](#) This difference is lost in the article Communisation and the Value-Form Theory (<http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/4>) in Endnotes #2 when identifying critique with Leninist agitation: “Nonetheless, most accounts of the Neue Marx-Lektüre understand one of its main characteristics to be a rejection of Marx's attribution of an historical mission to the proletariat, and a sensibility of scepticism towards the class struggle has been prevalent on the German left. But if in this type of view the proletariat is rejected as an agency of revolution then the question becomes of course — where will the abolition of class society come from? The somewhat unsatisfactory answer prevalent in various forms in German discussions seems to be that it is a matter of having the right critique — that is, in seeing the revolution as a matter of acquiring the correct consciousness. In this focus on correct consciousness and critique, it seems that ironically — for all the questioning of traditional Marxism — a certain Leninist problematic separating educator and educated is retained.” The same problematic is retained when someone explains the way to the train station, when the authors of Endnotes explain this very point or when we argue against it here. Leninist agitation tasks its counter part with a mission instead of acknowledging the disagreement.

