

## FUNDAMENTALS OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores the basic tenets of historical materialism. It is relevant to identifying the general trends of historical materialistic critique of the evolution of human society. The article addresses the research problems concerning the conception of history, the relationship between base and superstructure, the significance of the mode of production, and the class struggle in the development of human history. The article deals with the problems through the review-based analysis of the historical materialistic critique of the rise of human society. The article reveals that the materialist interpretation of history is the key to historical materialism. The materialist conception of history interprets the basis of every social order according to production and the relation of production. It regards class struggle as the reflection of the conflict between the forces of production and the relation of production. The materialist conception of history views the mode of production or the economic base as the determining element in history but in many cases, the different forms of superstructure also react upon the base and play their role in changing the course of history.*

**Key Words:** base, class, history, material, production, struggle, superstructure

### **Introduction**

The term "historical materialism" refers to applying the ideas and rules of dialectical materialism to studying human civilization. Dialectical materialism studies the inner laws of nature, or deals with natural science, whereas historical materialism investigates the inner rules of human society or deals with social science. The two theories of materialism— dialectical and historical—have an organic link, but historical materialism has its own peculiarities when it comes to dealing with the rules and regulations of human society. Historical materialism examines the fundamental laws of the historical development of human society, and while studying human society, it considers society as a single organic whole with its various constituent elements interacting with one another. Historical materialism goes against the idealist approach and adopts the materialist stand while evaluating the historical process of human progress. It defines the relationship between 'the economic base' which includes the modes of production and exchange or 'the economic structure of society' and a 'superstructure', the political institution that emerged from 'the economic base'. It studies the evolution of human society in terms of the struggle between the forces of production and the relation of production. Human beings participate in production and struggle to gain hold in the relation of production which is reflected in the class struggle. Historical materialism, therefore, regards the class struggle as the driving force for the development of human society. This article analyzes some of these basic tenets of historical materialism.

### **Materialist Conception of History**

The materialist conception of history is the result of the continuation and expansion of materialism's tenets into the field of social phenomena. Pre-Marxist sociology was unable to develop a true science of society or identify the objective rules governing the course of history (Syusyukalov "Materialist" 73). Vladimir Ilyich Lenin demonstrates the two primary flaws in past historical theories:

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In the first place, they at best examined only the ideological motives of the historical activity of human beings, without investigating what produced these motives, without grasping the objective laws governing the development of the system of social relations, and without discerning the roots of these relations in the degree of development of material production; in the second place, the earlier theories did not cover the activities of the *masses* of the population. ("*Karl Marx*" 17)

The earlier historical theories employed an idealist approach to evaluate the historical process of human progress giving priority to ideological motives, without examining the objective laws that formed these motives. Their theories also failed to account for the actions of the general populace, who are truly "the maker of history" (Engels "*Ludwig*" 46).

The process of comprehending human history is reversed by the materialist conception of history. In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels state: "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behavior" ("*Feuerbach*" 24-5). Ideas, concepts, consciousness, conceiving, thinking, and all other mental activities are the outcomes of men's physical behavior. Historical materialism does a good job of addressing the relationship between social beings and social consciousness, a key topic in philosophy as it relates to social life. Marx makes this argument in his dictum: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (137). The term "social being" refers to society's material life, while the term "social consciousness" refers to all of the theories, beliefs, emotions, and customs that reflect society's nature and material life. The materialist interpretation of history pioneered by Marx and Engels and continued by Lenin, Stalin, and Mao caused a profound shift in sociological theory (Syusyukalov "*Materialist*" 74). Therefore, the materialist conception of history is the core of historical materialism.

## **Base and Superstructure**

The materialist conception of history determines the foundation of every social order according to the production and the relation of production of that specific stage of human society. Engels exemplifies: "In every society that has appeared in history, the distribution of wealth and with it the division of society into classes or estates are dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged" ("*Socialism*" 74). The modes of production and exchange in a given society are referred to as the 'economic structure of society' which is also known as the economic 'base' and ". . . from this economic base, in every period, emerges a 'superstructure' – certain forms of law and politics, a certain kind of state, whose essential function is to legitimate the power of the social class which owns the means of economic production" (Eagleton 5). Marx introduces the idea of base and superstructure in the "Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy":

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. (137)

A legal and political superstructure is viewed as only a reflection of a society's economic foundation. In addition to law and politics, the superstructure also consists of a "particular type of social consciousness," such as religion, ethics, aesthetics, and so forth. Marxism refers to this as ideology,

and it serves to legitimize the authority of the ruling class in society (Eagleton 5). Marx and Engels quote in *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class” (“Proletarians” 57). The dominant ideologies of a given society are the ideologies of its ruling class.

Human consciousness—their ideas, beliefs, and conceptions—change with each alteration in the circumstances of their material existence, or their social interactions and relationships. Changes in the economic foundation lead to changes in the superstructure. To put it another way, the economic foundation affects the superstructure. But, this does not imply that the economic base is never influenced by the superstructure. The base and the superstructure have a dialectical relationship. In “a letter to Joseph Bloch in 1890”, Engels explains as follows:

According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its results, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas – also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*. (682)

The economic base is the primary determinant of history, but in many instances, different forms of the superstructure, such as political forms, constitutions, political, legal, and philosophical theories, as well as ideas from various religions, literature, and the arts, also actively contribute to shaping its economic base. The subjective elements play an equal role in advancing social development as the objective factors do. Historical materialism opposes the idea that the base and the superstructure have any kind of mechanical, one-to-one relationship; instead, it supports a two-way dialectical relationship between them.

### **Material Production as the Basis of Social Development**

It is crucial to understand the characteristics of the economic base of a given society because it has been established that it serves as the foundation upon which the political superstructure is built. It is important to know the essentials of the economic foundation of a given civilization since they dictate the social system's characteristics and how society evolves from one system to another. Historical materialism believes that the process of acquiring the resources required for human existence, i.e., the mode of production of material values – food, clothing, footwear, houses, fuel, instruments of production, etc. – which are vital for life and growth of society, is the essence of the economic base of any society (Stalin 15). The core of the economic base of a given civilization is thus the mode of production of material goods that represents the reality of material production in concrete historical forms. B. I. Syusyukalov et al. elucidate:

Marx and Engels were the first to introduce in sociology the concept of *the mode of production of the material wealth*, reflecting the existence of material production in concrete historical forms. Several modes of production – primitive communal, slave-owning, feudal and capitalist – have existed and succeeded one another ever since society came into existence. Nowadays the communist mode of production is coming to replace outgoing capitalism. (“Material” 82)

The five tangible historical forms of human society are reflected in the five modes of production. Primitive communal, slave-owning, feudal, and capitalist societies all emerged one after the other, and now the capitalist mode of production will be replaced by the communist one.

The productive forces and relation of production are two opposing components of the mode of production of material values. Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin exemplifies: “The *instruments of production* wherewith material values are produced, the *people* who operate the instruments of production and carry on the production of material values, thanks to a certain *production experience* and *labor skill* – all these elements jointly constitute the *productive forces* of society” (15). After the productive forces incorporate the instruments of production and people’s labor skill and experience, “. . . they reflect the people’s relation to nature. Their development level – from primitive stone implements in ancient times to modern unique machines – demonstrates the degree to which man has mastered nature.” The conflict between man and nature has played a fundamental role in the development of productive forces from ancient times to the present. The relationship among men in the processes of production, distribution, and exchange is known as the “relation of production”: “Production relations also include relations of ownership of the means of production, relations established among classes and social groups during production and also the forms and methods of distributing material benefits” (Syusyukalov "Material" 83). The relation of production indicates the various types of ownership to the means of production.

The production or the mode of production has unique characteristics. Stalin lists the three characteristics of production. The first characteristic of production is that it is a dynamic phenomenon rather than a static one. It is continuously susceptible to change. Stalin states:

The *first feature* of production is that it never stays at one point for a long time and is always in a state of change and development, and that, furthermore, changes in the mode of production inevitably call forth changes in the whole social system, social ideas, political views and political institutions – they call forth a reconstruction of the whole social and political order. (16)

The dialectical laws of motion of matter also apply in the development of the production system. The entire social structure transforms together with the production system. All social development depends critically on the growth of production. Consequently, historical materialism emphasizes the role of the producers of material values or of the laboring masses and ignores the role of some powerful individuals, such as monarchs and generals, in every social progress. Stalin claims:

If historical science is to be a real science, it can no longer reduce the history of social development to the actions of kings and generals, to the actions of ‘conquerors’ and ‘subjugators’ of states, but must above all devote itself to the history of the producers of material values, the history of the laboring masses, the history of peoples. (17)

The only source for the history of social development is the history of the people who produce material values. Hence, it is not appropriate to look for the origins of social evolution or political revolution in the minds of people or in the values and ideologies of society, but rather in the mode of production and the economic activities of the society. Engels states: “The ultimate causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men’s brains, not in their growing insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the *philosophy*, but in the *economics* of each particular epoch” (“*Socialism*” 74). Historical materialism emphasizes examining and revealing the laws of production, the rules governing the growth of the productive forces and of the relations of production, and the laws governing the social and economic development of a given civilization.

The internal conflict that exists between the two components of production—the productive forces and relations of production—is how production evolves and changes. The productive forces are the primary aspect of the two and are responsible for bringing about change and the development of production. But, under some circumstances, it is the relations of production themselves that are most important and significant. Stalin explains:

The *second feature* of production is that its changes and development always begin with changes and development of the productive forces, and in the first place, with changes and development of the instruments of production. Productive forces are therefore the most mobile and revolutionary element of productions. First the productive forces of society change and develop, and then, *depending* on these changes and *in conformity with them*, men's relations of production, their economic relations, change. This, however, does not mean that the relations of production do not influence the development of the productive forces and that the latter are not dependent on the former. While their development is dependent on the development of the productive forces, the relations of production in their turn react upon the development of the productive forces, accelerating or retarding it. (17)

Changes and development first start with the development of the productive forces, which bring changes in men's relations of production, their economic relations. As a result, the productive forces are seen as dynamic, mobile, and deciding. Yet, the growth of the productive forces can occasionally be sped up or slowed down by the relations of production. The productive forces and the relations of production are in a dialectical relationship. Mao Tsetung suggests: "When it is impossible for the productive forces to develop without a change in the relations of production, then the change in the relations of production plays the principal and decisive role" (116). So, in the process of production's evolution, the role of the relations of production also cannot be disregarded.

Men participate in production in order to gain immediate, observable benefits, but they have no idea where it will take them. They are unaware that their participation in a specific form of production promotes the growth of productive forces that are compelled to bring about a new social order that is inimical to their interests. In other words, men engage in production while unwittingly entering into specific production relations that may be against their choice. Marx exemplifies it in his dictum: "In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces" (137). Stalin presents the third feature of production based on this Marx quotation:

The *third feature* of production is that the rise of new productive forces and of the relations of production corresponding to them does not take place separately from the old system, after the disappearance of the old system, but within the old system; it takes place not as a result of the deliberate and conscious activity of man, but spontaneously, unconsciously, independently of the will of man. (23)

The rise of the new productive forces and the production relations that go along with them within the old system occurs without any intentional action on the part of men. Members of the prehistoric communal society were unaware that switching to iron implements from stone tools would revolutionize manufacturing and eventually establish the slave system (Stalin 23). Those members of prehistoric communal society would not have used iron implements if they had realized that they would be transformed into slaves in the slave system. Young European bourgeoisie built big factories alongside small guild workshops in the period of the feudal system, developing the productive forces, but they were unaware that this "little" invention would eventually lead to the

collapse of the power of monarchs and the nobility (Stalin 24). If kings and nobles had known that aiding the young bourgeoisie would bring about their own destruction, they would not have given it their support. The Russian capitalists introduced a modern, large-scale machine industry, but they were unaware that this would pave the way for a successful socialist revolution (Stalin 24). Russian capitalists had no interest in a socialist revolution.

This does not imply that the growth of production can bring about social revolution on its own. Old production relations are replaced by new ones, but this process is not frictionless; in fact, new production relations can only be established by removing the old ones. Stalin claims:

Up to a certain period the development of the productive forces and the changes in the realm of the relations of production proceed spontaneously independently of the will of men. But that is so only up to a certain moment, until the new and developing productive forces have reached a proper state of maturity. After the new productive forces have matured, the existing relations of production and their upholders – the ruling classes – become that “insuperable” obstacle which can only be removed by the conscious action of the new classes, by the forcible acts of these classes, by revolution. (24-5)

The evolution of productive forces causes the production relations to alter in a natural way up until a certain point. Then, the existing production relations and those who support them, the ruling classes, seem as a barrier that can only be removed by the use of force by new classes through revolution. The evolution of the production mode only creates the prerequisite for the new social classes to usher in the new social order by means of revolution.

## **Class Struggle**

The class struggle is a reflection of the conflict between the productive forces and relations of production. The productive forces are made up of members of several social classes who compete with one another for relations of production, i.e., for gaining ownership of the means of production. The struggle of classes is, therefore, regarded as the basis and impetus for the entire development (Lenin "*Three Sources*" 7). People's primary goal in engaging in a class struggle is to seize the means of production or to achieve economic independence. In *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels states the following: "In modern history at least it is, therefore, proved that all political struggles are class struggles, and all class struggles for emancipation, despite their necessary political form – for every class struggle is a political struggle – turn ultimately on the question of *economic* emancipation" (51). All of the political conflicts we observe in contemporary human history are class conflicts, and their ultimate goals are economic security and freedom.

In prehistoric communal society, there were no classes. Everybody used to contribute to the production process, and there was a tendency to distribute the means of subsistence equally. Slavery led to the emergence of classes as people were split into two antagonistic groups: slaves and slave owners. Lenin provides the following definition of classes:

Classes are large groups of people which differ from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labour, and, consequently, by the mode of acquisition and the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy. ("*Great*" 13)

Classes are large groups of individuals with varying statuses in social production and in their relation to the means of production. They play diverse roles in contributing labor to the production

of tangible goods, and they receive an unequal portion of the social wealth. In accordance with a particular social economic system, some people make a living by working, while others amass material wealth by using the labor of others. Classes are defined differently depending on the form of appropriation and are based on the appropriation of the labor of other people. Lenin adds extra clarification: "If one section of society appropriates all the land, we have a landlord class and a peasant class. If one section of society possesses the mills and factories, shares and capital, while another section works in these factories, we have a capitalist class and a proletarian class" ("*Tasks*" 12). Based on the appropriation of other people's labor, slavery is divided into two main opposing classes: the slave-owner class and the slave class; feudalism is divided into two opposing classes: the landlord class and the peasant class; and similarly, capitalism is divided into a capitalist class and a proletarian class.

In a class-based society, it is evident that each class acts in its own self-interest. Especially, the ruling class uses these tactics to further its control and repression of the oppressed class. The ruling class people deceive the downtrodden class in the name of ethics, morals, and religion. Lenin claims: "In the sense in which it is preached by the bourgeoisie, who derived ethics from God's commandments. We, of course, say that we do not believe in God, and that we know perfectly well that the clergy, the landlords and the bourgeoisie spoke in the name of God in pursuit of their own interests as exploiters" ("*Tasks*" 11). In the name of God, the clergy, landlords, and bourgeoisie, who belonged to the oppressor class, attempt to impose ethics and morality on the oppressed class merely to protect their own class interests. There are no unchanging morals or ethics; rather, all morals and ethics are depending on a person's class. Nonetheless, the governing class succeeds in misleading the populace by inventing various moral, religious, political, and social promises. People will be misled indefinitely if they do not comprehend the motivations behind the promises and platitudes they are given. Lenin advises: "People always were and always will be the foolish victims of deceit and self-deceit in politics until they learn to discover the *interests* of some class or other behind all moral, religious, political and social phrases, declarations and promises" (7). The ruling class will take any action and perform any task necessary to protect their class interests. Thus, members of the oppressed class must be aware of the evil motives of the ruling class and organize in their fight against them. The only force that can dismantle the ruling class's resistance and establish the new system is the class struggle. Lenin asserts: "And there is only one way of smashing the resistance of these classes, and that is to find, in the very society which surrounds us, and to enlighten and organize for the struggle, the forces which can – and owing to their social position, must – constitute the power capable of sweeping away the old and creating the new" ("*Three Sources*" 7). In order to bring about social change, class conflict is therefore a fundamental phenomenon. No one wants a class war, but it has historically been necessary for the advancement of society.

Class struggle has played a key role in transforming human society from enslavement to the present. Marx and Engels, who conducted extensive research on the social change trend and the role of class struggle in driving this change, write in *Manifesto of the Communist Party*:

The history of all hitherto existing society (with the exception of its primitive stages – Engels added subsequently in his book *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, page 71) is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. ("Bourgeois" 32-3)

Leaving aside the history of the prehistoric communal society, the history of human society can be reduced to the history of class struggles, which shaped modern human civilization. Despite the differences in the intensity of their battles, members of the oppressor and the oppressed classes have continuously engaged in class conflict. No matter how society changes, there will always be class conflict. In today's capitalist society, the populace is split between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and a constant war of classes exists between them until the proletariat seizes control and socialism is founded. Nonetheless, even under socialism, there will still be class distinctions. Private property and disparities between individuals in various sectors gave rise to the classes, and the private property and these disparities must be eliminated in order for the classes to disappear. Lenin asserts:

In order to abolish classes completely, it is not enough to overthrow the exploiters, the landlords and capitalists, not enough to abolish *their* rights of ownership; it is necessary also to abolish *all* private ownership of the means of production, it is necessary to abolish the distinction between town and country, as well as the distinction between manual workers and brain workers. This requires a very long period of time. ("*Great*" 13)

Class divisions will not be removed until communism is fully implemented, in which all forms of private ownership of the means of production and human inequalities are eradicated. After negating five modes of production, the classless primitive communal society will evolve into a classless scientific communal society. In order to negate these modes of production, the class struggle is crucial.

## **Conclusion**

The article reveals some of the fundamental principles of historical materialism. Historical materialism opposes the idealist approach and adopts the materialist interpretation of the evolution of human history. The materialist conception of history is the key to historical materialism. The materialist conception of history takes the modes of production and exchange i.e., the 'economic structure of society' or the 'economic base' as the determining element for bringing change in 'superstructure', the political institution emerged out of the 'economic base'. Though historical materialism regards the 'economic base' as primary, the different forms of the superstructure, such as political forms, constitutions, and political, legal, religious, and philosophical theories play their role in shaping the economic base and, thus, it also gives importance to the superstructure and finds the dialectical relationship between the base and the superstructure. Historical materialism regards the productive forces and relation of production as the two contradictory aspects of the mode of production of material values. The mode of production is found to have unique features. It is a dynamic phenomenon rather than a static one. Production does not stay at one point for a long time and the change in the mode of production inevitably brings a change in the whole social system. Productive forces are the primary aspect in the contradiction of the mode of production and they are mobile and determining one in bringing change in the relation of production. However, the production feature does not minimize the role of the relation of production and defines its dialectical relationship with the productive forces as it sometimes plays its role in accelerating or retarding the development of the productive forces. The new productive forces and the relation of production corresponding to them emerge within the old system and they take place independently of the will of man. Historical materialism interprets class struggle as the reflection of the conflict between the productive forces and relations of production and, therefore, considers it as the key factor or the driving force for the development of human society. The article exposes the materialist conception of history, the dialectical concept of base and superstructure, the prime role of the mode of production, and the class struggle for the development of human society as the cornerstones of historical materialism.

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