

TOWARDS A RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM*

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In the present paper I will analyze the merits and limitations of historical materialism to the extent that it can be considered a theoretical explanation of social evolution. I would like to begin by introducing and critically scrutinizing the fundamental concepts and main hypotheses of historical materialism. Moreover, after indicating some of the problems, I shall also propose and illustrate a possible solution. First, I will deal with the concepts of "social labor" and "history of the species,"

1. Socially organized labor is the specific way through which humans as distinguished from animals reproduce their life:

One can make the distinction between man and animal by virtue of consciousness, religion or whatever else one may choose. Man himself begins to differentiate himself from the animals as soon as he starts to produce his own means of subsistence. By producing his own means of subsistence he indirectly produces his material life. (Marx, *Deutsche Ideologie*)

This concept of social labor can be analyzed in terms of three different types of rules — rules of instrumental, strategic, and communicative action. What is decisive is the aspect of the purposeful reforming of material according to *rules of instrumental action*.

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* This paper has been translated by Robert Strauss. It is a shortened version of a book in German which is four times as long and contains an extensive bibliography and footnotes. The book, which is by Klaus Eder, is called: *Die Entstehung vorkapitalistischer Klassengesellschaften. Ein Beitrag zur Konstruktion einer Theorie der soziokulturellen Evolution*. MS, MPIL, Starnberg, 1975 (forthcoming).

Naturally Marx understands by production not merely the instrumental actions of a single individual, but more the cooperation of several individuals. The instrumental actions of these various individuals become socially coordinated according to the purpose of production; thus, the *rules of strategic action* which guide this cooperation are an essential element of the labor process. It is unimportant that the means of subsistence are only produced in order to be used, since the distribution of its products, as well as labor, are socially organized. But the rules of distribution have still another structure, for it is not a question here of the transformation of material or of the purposeful rational organization of means, but of the reciprocal connection of behavioral expectations or interests. The distribution of products requires norms that are intersubjectively recognized – *rules of communicative action*.

We call a system which socially organizes labor and distribution an economy; thus Marx is convinced that the “economic” mode of the reproduction of life is specific for the human stage of development. Here, a significant question is whether this Marxian concept of social labor sufficiently determines the form or reproduction of human life. If we consider this in the light of recent anthropological findings, it appears that the concept of social labor extends too deeply into the scale of evolution: not only *homo sapiens*, but even the hominids are distinguished from other primates in that they reproduce themselves through social labor and develop an economy. This is the period of hominization: beginning with a common ancestor for both chimpanzee and man, and reaching over *homo erectus* to *homo sapiens*. Here, among the hominids, the adult men form hunting groups which (a) dispose of weapons and tools (technology), (b) cooperate through a division of labor (cooperative organization) and (c) collectively distribute the prey (rules of distribution).

The Marxist concept of social labor is thus suitable for distinguishing the mode of life of the hominids from that of the primates; however, it does not hold for the specifically *human* mode of reproduction of life. What is specific for human beings is that they are the first to break up the social structure which had emerged from the vertebrates; only they break up that one-dimensional status order in which each animal has a single status in the hierarchy. As far as we know, the hominid societies based on social labor had not yet been organized in kinship relationships. Only a family system allows status, in the adult male’s system of the hunting group, to be linked (via the father’s role) to status in the system of the female-and-young, thus integrating functions of social-labor with functions of nurture of the young. Furthermore, this integrates male hunting functions with female collecting activity.

It seems, then, that we can refer to the reproduction of human life in *homo*

sapiens only when the economy of the hunt is supplemented by kinship structures. This process has lasted several million years; it represents an important replacement of the animal status system. Among the primates this status system is based on a certain kind of symbolic interaction; but the role system of kinship presupposes language. For the fundamental anthropological assumptions of historical materialism this could imply the following:

The concept of social labor is fundamental because the social organization of labor and distribution obviously precedes the development of explicit linguistic communication which, in turn, precedes the formation of social role systems.

However, the specifically human mode of life can only be adequately described if we unite the concept of social labor with that of the kinship structure.

The structures of role behavior mark a new evolutionary threshold compared to the structures of social labor; the rules of communicative action, that is intersubjectively valid norms of action, cannot be reduced to rules whether of instrumental or strategic action.

Production and socialization, the life processes in the sphere of social labor and child-rearing, are of equal importance for the reproduction of the species. The kinship structure, which controls both the integration of the external as well as the internal nature is, therefore, basic.

2. Marx links the concept of social labor with that of the history of the species. This signals above all the materialist message that natural evolution is now continued within the range of one single species by different means, namely through the productive activity of the socialized individuals themselves. The key to a reconstruction of the history of mankind is offered by the idea of the *mode of production*. History is then conceived as a succession of different modes of production, which in their pattern of development reveal the direction of social evolution. For Marx, of course, a mode of production is characterized by a particular stage in the development of the productive forces and by particular forms of social exchange, that is, relations of production. The *productive forces* consist (a) of the labor force of the producers; (b) of the technical knowledge, insofar as it is converted into production techniques; (c) of organizational knowledge, insofar as it is efficiently employed to set labor power in motion, to produce skilled labor, and to coordinate specialized labor (mobilization, qualification and organization of labor power). The productive forces determine the extent to which we

can control natural processes and exploit natural resources. The *relations of production*, on the other hand, are those institutions and social mechanisms which specify in what way labor can be combined with the available means of production. The regulation of access to the means of production or the channels of control of socially utilized labor also indirectly determines the distribution of the social wealth. Hence the relations of production express the distribution of power; they determine the distributional pattern of opportunities and thereby the interest structure which exists in society. Historical materialism, then, proceeds from the assumption that productive forces and relations of production do not vary independently of each other, but rather form structures which (a) internally correspond and (b) produce a finite number of developmental stages homologous in their structure so that (c) the succession of the modes of production reveal a developmental logic. ("The hand-mill produces a society of feudal lords, the steam-mill, a society of industrial capitalists.")

The orthodox version differentiates between five modes of production: the primitive communal mode of production of the band and tribe; the ancient mode of production based on slave-holding; the feudal; the capitalist; finally, the socialist mode of production. A discussion, centered on the classification of the ancient Orient and the ancient Americas led to the insertion of an Asiatic mode of production, with which the development of civilization begins. These six modes of production should define universal stages of social evolution. This means that, from an evolutionary standpoint, the economic structure of every distinctive society can be analyzed in terms of the various modes of production which have entered into a hierarchical association in that society.

In primitive societies, labor and distribution are organized through kinship; there is no private access to nature and to the means of production (primitive communal mode of production). Administered by the priesthood, the military and the bureaucracy, there exists in the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, ancient China, ancient India and ancient America landed property belonging to the state which is superimposed upon the residue of village community property (the so-called Asiatic mode of production). In Greece, Rome and other mediterranean societies, the private landholder combines the status of slave-holder in the context of his domestic economy with the status of citizen in the political community of town or state (ancient mode of production). In medieval Europe, feudalism is based on large private landed estates allotted to many individual holders. The landholders enter into various political and economic relations of dependency (even serfdom) with

the feudal lord (feudal mode of production). Finally, in capitalism the labor force becomes a commodity, so that the dependence of the direct producers upon those who own the means of production becomes legally institutionalized through the labor contract and economically through the labor market.

The dogmatic formulation of the concept of the history of the species shares a set of weaknesses with the models of a philosophy of history rooted in the eighteenth century. However, historical materialism needs to presuppose a macrosystem to whom the evolutionary process is assigned. The bearers of evolution are society and its members. Evolution can be read from those structures which, following a rational pattern, are replaced by ever more comprehensive structures. In the course of this structure-creating process the social entities involved also change. In addition where is the question of the sense in which one can interpret the emergence of new structures as movement; certainly only the empirical substrata are in motion, that is, the societies and their individuals. The most disputed area is teleology, which historical materialism sees as inherent in history. By evolution, we refer to cumulative processes which allow a direction to be perceived. Neo-evolutionist theories consider increasing complexity as a reasonable criterion. The more states a system can choose, the more complex the environment with which it will be able to cope. Marx also ascribed great importance to the "social division of labor." This refers to the processes that enhance the adaptive capacity of a society. However, historical materialism does not judge progress by this criterion of complexity, but according to the development of productive forces and to the maturation of forms of social integration that enable increased participation in politically relevant decision-making processes. These two dimensions are not selected arbitrarily. Since further productive forces and new forms of social integration are a result of the social implementation of technical and moral-practical knowledge, the selection of both these dimensions in the last analysis is determined by two related claims to validity: namely, by the truth of its propositions and the justifiability of its norms. I would therefore defend the position that the criteria of historical progress which historical materialism distinguishes with the development of the productive forces and the emancipation of social constraint are capable of a systematic justification. In any case, I assume that the idea of the history of the species can be reformulated to meet the objections against the idea of one-dimensional necessary and irreversible social evolution of a reified species subject.

Having elucidated the concepts of "social labor" and of "history of the species," I shall now briefly turn to two of historical materialism's basic

assumptions: first, to the theory of base and superstructure, and second, to the dialectic of production forces and the relations of production.

3. In every society productive forces and the relations of production form an *economic structure* by which the other subsystems are determined. For a considerable length of time an economic version of this thesis has prevailed. The context in which Marx propounds his theory makes it clear that the dependence of superstructure on base is valid only for the critical phase during which a social system is passing onto a new developmental level. What is meant is not some ontological constitution of society, but rather the guiding role which the economic structure assumes in social evolution. Thus the thesis purports that evolutionary innovations solve only such problems as may arise at the substructural level of a society and which demand a change within the base. The identification of substructure with economic structure could lead to the assumption that the substructural level is equivalent to the economic system. That is, however, valid only for modern societies. Relations of production are defined by their function in regulating access to the means of production and indirectly the distribution of social wealth. This function is assumed in primitive societies by kinship systems and in traditional societies by political institutions. It is not until the market, in addition to its cybernetic function, also takes over the function of stabilizing class relations that the relations of production assume a purely economic form.

The particular institutional core that takes over the functions of the relations of production determines the dominant form of social integration. I use this term in the Durkheimian sense of integration through norms and values. If systems problems, e.g., ecological, demographic, economic problems, can no longer be solved in accord with an existing form of social integration, if this itself must be revolutionized in order to create latitude for the solution of problems, the the identity of the society is challenged and society itself is thrown into a crisis. Marx sees the mechanism of this crisis in the dialectic of productive forces and the relations of production.

This thesis can be interpreted in the following way; an indigenous learning mechanism exists which provides for spontaneous growth of technical knowledge and for the development of the productive forces. In this context, a mode of production is only in a state of equilibrium when structural homologies exist between the developmental stages of the productive forces and the relations of production. Correspondingly, this means that the indigenous development of productive forces generates structural incompatibilities which in turn evoke imbalances in the existing mode of production and thereby lead

to a revolution in the existing relations of production. It is in this structuralist sense that Godelier, for example, adopted the thesis.

However, in such a formulation we still cannot precisely locate the developmental mechanism. The *learning mechanism* postulated explains the growth of a cognitive potential (and also perhaps its conversion into increasing labor productivity). It can explain the emergence of systems problems, which if the structural homologies between productive forces and relations of production break down, threaten the stability of the mode of production. However, this learning mechanism does not explain how these problems can be solved; for the introduction of new forms of social integration, as for instance, the replacement of the kinship system with the state, demands a knowledge of a practical-moral kind. Technical knowledge, which can be implemented with rules of instrumental and strategic action, or an expansion of our control over external nature, is not what is required, but, rather, a knowledge which can seek its embodiment in structures of interaction. We can understand the development of productive forces as a problem-generating mechanism that *releases* but does not *create* the evolutionary renewal of the mode of production.

But even in this form our thesis cannot be maintained as a universal proposition on empirical grounds. The great indigenous thrusts of evolution that led to the rise of ancient civilizations or capitalism in Europe, entailed considerable development of the productive forces not as a condition, but rather as a consequence. Only when a new institutional framework had emerged could the unresolved problems be dealt with through the accumulated cognitive potential. This in turn resulted in an increase in the productive forces.

This short discussion of the two main assumptions of historical materialism has led to the following preliminary conclusions:

That all systems problems which cannot be solved without evolutionary innovations arise in the substructure of a society.

That the higher modes of production signify new forms of social integration, which in each case, crystallize around a new institutional core.

That an indigenous learning mechanism provides for the concentration of a cognitive potential which can be employed to solve an evolutionary crisis.

That, however, this knowledge can only be implemented with the consequent development of the productive forces if the evolutionary step towards a new form of social integration has been completed.

The question remains: how is this step possible? The descriptive reply of historical materialism answers this with the mechanisms of social conflicts, political struggle, and social movements. But only an analytic reply can explain why a society moves to another evolutionary level and how social movements under particular conditions lead to a new form of social integration, and therewith to a new developmental level for the society. The answer which I would like to suggest is this: the species not only learns technical knowledge relevant for the development of the productive forces, but also the decisive dimension of moral-practical knowledge which can be embodied into structures of interaction. The rules of communicative action do not automatically follow changes in the field of instrumental and strategic action; they develop rather by virtue of their own dynamics. I will add only a few remarks on the dynamics of the development of moral-practical consciousness.

4. The evolutionary learning processes cannot be ascribed exclusively either to society or individuals. Certainly the personality system bears the learning process of ontogenesis, and to a certain extent, learning is done only by individuals. However, social systems can form new structures by utilizing the learning capacities of its members in order to cope with systems problems which threaten the maintenance of the self. In this respect the evolutionary learning process of societies is dependent on the competence of the single members. These in turn do not acquire their competences as isolated monads, but by growing into the symbolic structure of their social world.

If we follow this process from the perspective of the socialized child, social reality acquires new depths. At first, actions, motives and actors are still observed on a single level of reality. At the next stage, actions and norms are perceived separately; the norms, together with the actors and their motives, then move on a level which lies behind the level of observable actions. At the final stage, principles from which norms of action can be produced and criticized are distinguished from the norms themselves. The principles together with the actors and their motives are withdrawn even further behind the norms, that is, behind the established interaction systems.

In this manner we emerge with the basic concepts for a genetic theory of action that can be used in two ways: either as concepts for an individual's competence in speech and action in a symbolic universe; or as concepts for this very universe.

Now, insofar as conflicts of action are not resolved by force or strategic means, but on a consensual basis, structures come into play which determine for the individual moral consciousness, and for society, moral beliefs and the legal system. The concept of "good and evil" crystallizes around the idea of reciprocity which lies at the base of all interactions. In the research tradition of Piaget these are developmental stages of moral consciousness. At the *pre-conventional level* where actions, motives, and actors are still perceived on a single level of reality, only the manifest consequences of action are assessed in the case of behavioral conflicts. At the *conventional level* the motives can be assessed independently of the concrete consequences of action; the intentional conformity with social expectations and existing norms is decisive. At the *post-conventional level* these norms lose their traditional authority and require justification through recourse to universal criteria. I would suggest that such individual competences can also be used for the solution of systems problems and for the innovation of legal institutions. This is what is meant by socio-evolutionary learning processes in the sphere of moral-practical consciousness.

I consider as a first step in the analysis the attempt to differentiate between levels of social integration. I doing so, I shall deal with the institutional system, the world-view, and moral beliefs separately from the legal system.

Neolithic societies: (a) *conventional* differentiation of level between actions and norms, mythical world-view still enmeshed in the system of action. (b) Resolution of conflicts according to pre-conventional criteria: assessment of the consequences of action, restitution of the former *status quo*, i.e., compensation for damages caused (feuding law, court of arbitration).

Archaic civilizations: (a) conventional interaction systems, but the formation of a differentiated mythical world-view which can assume functions of legitimation for political authorities. (b) Resolution of conflicts from the standpoint of a conventional morality dependent on the ruler: assessment of the intentions of the actor; punishment in relation to culpability.

Developed premodern civilizations: (a) conventional interaction system; formation of a rationalized world-view (ethical system founded on cosmologies or monotheism); legitimation of the political system independent of the ruler's person. (b) Resolution of conflicts from the standpoint of a developed, conventional morality; system of jurisdiction to which the ruler is subject on principle, punishment for deviance from traditionally justified norms.

5. I shall illustrate how this approach works by selecting the problems of the origin of class societies, since I can rely on a study by Klaus Eder in this regard.

(1) Class societies arise within the framework of a political system; social integration here no longer needs to proceed through the kinship system, but can be taken over by the state. There have been a number of theories on the origin of the state which I would first like to mention and criticize.

(a) *The subjugation theory* explains the emergence of political rulers and the establishment of a state apparatus through nomadic, pastoral tribes conquering settled agricultural peasants. This theory today has been refuted: since nomadism occurs later than the first civilizations, the emergence of the state must have had indigenous causes.

(b) *The division of labor theory* is usually stated in a complex way. Agricultural production achieves a surplus and permits (in combination with demographic growth) the release of labor for its purposes. This leads to a social division of labor. The various social groups which thereby emerge appropriate social wealth differentially and form social classes, at least one of which assumes political functions. This theory, in spite of its apparent plausibility, is not consistent. An argument is missing which would show why political functions originate from differentiated interests rooted in professional specialization. Actually, the social division of labor occurs as much within the politically dominant classes (between priesthood, military and bureaucracy) as within the working population (e.g., between farmers, and craftsmen).

(c) *The theory of social inequality* traces the emergence of the state to distribution problems. A surplus arises from the productivity of labor, and the increasing wealth differentials result in social inequalities with which the basically egalitarian kinship system cannot cope. The distribution problems demand a different, that is, political organization of social exchange. This thesis could, if true, explain at least the origin of systems problems which were solved by state organization. Nevertheless, it would not be sufficient to explain this new form of social integration. Furthermore, the assumption of automatic growth in the productive forces is not true for agricultural production.

(d) *The irrigation hypothesis* explains the integration of several village communities into a political unit by reason of their need to master drought through large-scale irrigation systems. These huge construction projects

require an administration that becomes the institutional core of the state. This assumption has been refuted empirically, because in Mesopotamia, China, and Mexico, the formation of states preceded irrigation projects. Furthermore, this theory would only explain the origin of systems problems, not the manner of their solution.

(e) *The theory of population density* explains the origin of the state primarily by ecological and demographic factors. An indigenous population growth is assumed that normally leads to a spatial expansion of segmentary societies (i.e., emigration into new areas). When, however, the ecological situation, neighbouring mountains, the sea or the desert, barren tracts of land, etc., hampered emigration or flight, conflicts arose due to population density and land scarcity. They allowed of no other alternative than for large sections of the population to submit to the political rule of the victorious tribe. The complexity of the densely populated settlements could only be controlled by state organization. Even if population problems of this kind could be proven to have existed in all former civilizations, this theory does not explain why and how such problems have been resolved.

None of the theories mentioned differentiates between systems problems which overstrain the steering capacity of the kinship system and the evolutionary learning process, which might explain the change to a new form of social integration. Only with the help of learning mechanisms can we explain why some societies find solutions to their problems at all, and why the particular solution of a state organization was chosen. I shall therefore proceed from the following main hypotheses:

Normally the interactive and the cognitive development of a child proceeds in stages, so that the child reaches a new learning level at each stage. In ontogenesis, it is not the learning processes, but the learning interruptions and retardation that must be explained.

A society can learn evolutionally by solving the problems which overstrain its ready steering capacity through converting and implementing the surplus of individual learning capacities into new institutional arrangements.

The first step in the social evolutionary learning process is the establishment of a new form of social integration which permits an increase in the productive forces and an expansion of the system's complexity.

Guided by these hypotheses, we shall submit the following explanatory sketch for the origin of class societies:

(a) *The phenomenon to be explained* is the origin of a political order that organizes a society so that its members can belong to different lineages. The function of social integration moves from kinship to political system. The collective identity is no longer embodied in the figure of a common ancestor, but rather in the figure of a common ruler.

(b) *Theoretical description* of the phenomenon: A ruling position is distinguished in that the position *per se* confers legitimacy on the occupant. Legitimacy no longer depends on a former status quo that must be restored as soon as it is upset. On the contrary, it is attached to a position that empowers the holder to administer justice without having to limit himself to the evaluation of concrete actions and consequences of actions. He is thereby not directly bound to actual constellations of powers. At the same time, mythical belief systems which interpret genealogically the ruler's privileges assume for the first time, in addition to their explanatory functions, functions of legitimation as well.

(c) *The goal of the explanation*: the differentiation of a ruling position means that the ruler practices jurisdiction at the level of conventional morality. Consequently, the origin of the state should be explained by the structural change of legal institutions moving from the pre-conventional to the conventional level of consensual settlement of conflicts.

The following is the explanatory sketch in greater detail:

(d) *The initial state*: I take the neolithic societies where the complexity of the kinship system has greatly increased to be the evolutionarily promising societies.

They in a way institutionalize political roles already. But the chieftains, kings or leaders are still judged by their concrete actions; their actions are not legitimate *per se*. Such roles are only temporarily institutionalized (e.g., for warfare) or limited to special tasks (e.g., to provide a good harvest or rain). These roles have not yet advanced into the centre of social organization. [Eder]

(e) *Particular systems problems*: In the evolutionarily promising neolithic societies systems problems sometimes arise which cannot be controlled by the steering capacity of the kinship system. They may devolve upon problems of land scarcity and population density or of unequal distribution of social wealth. These problems are perceived when they lead to conflicts that overburden the archaic legal institutions (court of arbitration, feuding law).

(f) *The testing of new structures:* in societies which are under pressure from such problems, the already available conventional structures of individual moral consciousness are used to test the administration of justice on a new, but conventional, level. So, for example, the war chief is empowered to adjudicate in cases of conflict not only according to the contingent constellation of power, but according to socially recognized traditional norms. Law is no longer restricted to that on which the parties can agree.

(g) *Stabilizing the innovations:* These roles can become the pacemakers of social evolution. However, not all promising experiments lead via such judicial functions to a permanent authority, that is, to an evolutionary success. This is shown in the example of the Barotse. Only if other conditions are present as well, for example, the military victory of a dominant tribe or a huge construction project, can such roles stabilize and become the core of a political system.

Such a development marks off the successful societies in evolutionary terms from those that are merely promising.

(h) *Emergence of class structures:* "On the basis of political authority the material process of production can then be uncoupled from the limiting conditions of the kinship system and reorganized by political relations." [Eder] The ruler assures the loyalty of his officials, priests, and warrior families by providing them privileged access to the means of production (temple and palace economy).

(i) *Development of the forces of production:*

The forces of production, which were already found by the neolithic revolution, can only now be used on a larger scale: the intensification of agriculture and stock-farming and the expansion of craft are the results of the extended steering capacity of the class society. Thus emerge new forms of cooperation (e.g., in irrigational farming) or of exchange (e.g., in the market exchange between town and country). [Eder]

The explanatory sketch which I submitted above may cause surprise in view of the subject, for at no point does the sketch refer to a particular mode of production. Instead, the two forms of social integration are described in relatively abstract terms of interactional and moral structures. In fact, its advantage lies precisely in this abstraction, for application of the scheme of six modes of production has resulted in numerous difficulties. During the last few decades discussions have concentrated mainly on the demarcation of

paleolithic from neolithic society; on the incorporation of the Asiatic mode of production; on the differentiation between archaic and developed civilizations; and on the interpretation of feudalism. These discussions in no way suggest the barrenness of the research program of historical materialism, but they do clearly demonstrate one point: the concept of the mode of production is not abstract enough to encompass the universals of developmental levels.

I propose therefore a need for abstract principles of organization. These principles of organization should comprehend those innovations that would institutionalize a new level of learning for each case. The organizational principle of a society opens the range of options. In particular, it determines the limits within which structural changes in the institutions can occur. It further defines to what degree the available capacities of productive forces can be socially employed, or to what degree the development of new forces of production can be stimulated. Through these determinations it is also able to ascertain how far the complexity of a system's steering capacities can be raised. ■