

A COMPANION TO WESTERN HISTORICAL THOUGHT

Edited by

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CHAPTER TEN

Marxism and Historical Thought

WALTER L. ADAMSON

Our conception of history is above all a guide to study, not a lever for construction after the manner of the Hegelians. All history must be studied afresh, the conditions of existence of the different formations of society must be individually examined before the attempt is made to deduce from them the political, civil-legal, aesthetic, philosophic, religious, etc., notions corresponding to them. Only a little has been done here up to now because only a few people have got down to it seriously.

Friedrich Engels (August 5, 1890)

No view of history has been more misunderstood or oversimplified than that of Karl Marx. It is commonly believed, for example, that Marx was an economic determinist who imposed a rigid evolutionary pattern on history in which an invariable sequence of modes of production – from primitive village communities through ancient kingships, feudalism, and capitalism – was inevitably leading to a communist society. Marx, it is also commonly said, approached society mechanistically, deducing the acts and beliefs of individuals from social structure, especially class position, and failing to accord culture any significant role in historical understanding and explanation. Such views are not without some foundation in Marx's writings, but, as we will shortly see, they depend on a selective reading that fails to appreciate important tensions and complexities in Marx's evolving theories. Properly understood, Marx's theories not only provide the basis for a sensitive and nuanced approach to empirical history but remain a stimulating source for historical thought and practice even after the "cultural turn" historical studies have taken in the past two decades.

Though anyone as controversial as Marx is bound to suffer many unsympathetic readings, it must be admitted that misunderstandings of his view of

history have largely been the product of the many shifts in his own intellectual trajectory or, what amounts to the same thing, the fact that he never explicated his view of history in any comprehensive and definitive work. His fullest statement in *The German Ideology*, an unpublished manuscript he co-authored with Engels in 1845–6, is based on a political theory he would soon abandon. Apart from that work, we have a methodological statement referring to the study of social life generally in which new assumptions about history emerge (1857); a summation of his intellectual development in which *The German Ideology's* view is restated but with somewhat different, even contradictory implications (1859); several detailed historical narratives dealing with recent revolutionary events in France (hence closer to historical journalism than reflective history); two prolix accounts of the genesis and nature of the capitalist mode of production, accounts that follow the methodological precepts of the 1857 essay and involve historical reflection but which are not history *per se*; and a number of letters by Marx and, especially, the late Engels, commenting on how historical writing should and should not be done. All offer helpful insight into what Marx's mature view of history might have been, but none state it unequivocally. To understand what this view is, then, we need to retrace his intellectual footsteps in order to place the various statements about history in relation to one another.

Marx's Critique of Hegel

Marx was trained as a philosopher and began as a left Hegelian. Left Hegelians believed that Hegel was right to see history as a dialectical unfolding of *Geist* (Spirit) through which the "rational" and the "real" were ultimately united, but that he was wrong to identify this final realization of history with the modern nation-state. Marx spent much of 1843 engaged in a critique of Hegel, whom he faulted both for his insufficiently revolutionary politics and for his tendency to interpret every earthly phenomenon in relation to a single overarching "Idea." Nonetheless, he did adopt Hegel's two-level view of the nature of what is – his ontology of existence and essence. Essences, according to this early Marx, are the final (perfect) states towards which existents are striving. They are separate from existents only as potentialities; they can be realized only in and through existence. Thus, even though essences cannot be located empirically in present reality, they are not simply to be deduced metaphysically. We become aware of them on the basis of our "needs," which are evidences of a lack that indicate how an existent could become a realized essence.

Reality, then, has an inherent teleology but its direction is set by "man" in accordance with his anthropological nature, which the early Marx understood in terms drawn from Ludwig Feuerbach. In Marx's rendition of this view,

human beings appear, in essence, as a species of laboring animals, yet they are unique in the creativity of their labor, which allows them to reshape and, in the end, recreate their environment. Fully realized, the creative essence of humans will produce a society in which each individual's creative essence is realized – in Marx's terminology, a communist society. At the same time, this communist society is nature's essence, for man is nature's mode of completing itself by bringing itself to self-conscious awareness. Nature, like Hegel's "Idea," needs human history for its development, and human history also requires nature for human development and progress. Nature existed prior to man but it attains its essence only through man; essential nature is a humanized nature. Human and natural history, then, can be emplotted as a single story in which *the* nature of the species, originally given as a potential, unfolds toward the full normative realization of nature as a whole. And though its teleological end is evident from man's productive nature, an empirical historian might still write this universal history by locating the "needs" that humans experienced along the way and considering how they engaged in creative activity to meet those needs.

The most important innovation in this Feuerbachian revamping of Hegel is the changed status of the human knower. While for Hegel the human knower was simply an instance of a larger *Geist* (Spirit) both collectively human and divine, the early Marx already treated the pursuit of knowledge as just another creative activity of humankind, no different in ontological status than any other. For Hegel, philosophy represented the queen of the sciences in that it afforded a comprehensive picture of the whole of existence and, in that sense, lay above or outside it. For Marx, in contrast, the pursuit of knowledge was immanent in the world and lacked any privileged vantage point. Marx's early anthropology or view of human nature implied, then, not only a more material view of history (the story of human creative action) but also a purely secular, scientific approach. Although Marx continued to use a Hegelian ontology that was ultimately metaphysical, his new anthropology opened the way to a new importance for empirical history and social science.

Late in 1844, Marx began an intellectual collaboration with Engels whose bent of mind and preferred style of investigation were much more empirical and scientific than were Marx's. Under his influence, Marx came to see that his anthropology of human creative action was still too abstract when the goal of that activity was conceived in the Feuerbachian terms of realizing a "human" or "species essence." In the "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845), Marx resolved the "human essence" into "the ensemble of social relations."¹ There are no fixed, human essences; all we have are what *The German Ideology* will call "living human individuals" (MER, p. 149). The problem of alienation, which presumes an essence that we are alienated from, was replaced in his mind by the problem of exploitation, which could only be overcome by the political action of the proletariat, not by the working out of logical operations in human

life. "Social life is essentially practical," Marx now averred. "All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice" (MER, p. 145).

Confident that he finally had both feet on the ground, Marx sought to articulate in *The German Ideology* the "premises" of history, premises that can be "verified in a purely empirical way" (MER, p. 149). There are, first, "living human individuals" whose creative life-activity aims to produce the means to satisfy materially felt needs. These means, together with the social relations or "mode of life" that surround them, represent a "mode of production" (MER, p. 150). Yet, secondly, the satisfaction of needs leads to new needs, and thus to the development of new technologies to satisfy them, which in turn become the basis for new modes of production. While Marx's brief summation of these modes of production suggested increasing complexity, he did not here imply any determinism of economic or technological development. He simply offered a concrete explanation for such development based on human nature, needs, and the social relations in which they are embedded. History emerges in this text as a succession of generations, each of which exploits and seeks to develop the productive forces taken over from its predecessors. It is an open-ended process, a string of contingent outcomes forged by human actors satisfying needs they themselves produce. Metaphysical language about hidden essences coming to realization is now wholly absent, and what Marx called "real, positive science" takes its place. "When reality is depicted [scientifically], philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence," he declared, and "its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which arise from the observation of the historical development of men" (MER, p. 155).

Despite such declarations, however, philosophy does not so much disappear in Marx's writings after 1845 as become transformed into social theory, one based entirely on empirical events and yet far more than a mere "summing-up" of their "general results." Theoretical abstractions from the historical process came to serve Marx as a guiding orientation for empirical research more or less in the way that "historical ideal types" would later serve Max Weber. Marx was never satisfied with empirical description. He wanted to grasp each era theoretically in terms of the logic of its mode of production and then to use that theoretical construct as the basis for empirical histories that would ultimately correct the theory. Because of the importance he attached to this mutual interaction of theory and history, Marx certainly took empirical history very seriously, even if his own preoccupation lay mainly in the domain of theory. Yet Marx cannot be said to have consistently maintained the same view of history after 1845 because the theoretical status he attributed to history changed, largely in relation to changes in his political outlook. To understand the source of the variations in his post-1845 view of history, we must look

briefly at how theoretical shifts as well as political events affected his political theory.

Marx's Conceptions of History and Theory

In 1844, Marx believed that “philosophical criticism” and the “proletariat” as the universal class were two expressions of the same historical realization of the essence of nature and humanity. But the proletariat was accorded only a “passive” role as the “material basis” of the transformation; it was philosophical criticism that first realized essence and that could therefore stimulate the people to carry out their destiny. The primacy of philosophy is unmistakable in the gendering of Marx’s explanatory metaphor: emancipation occurs when the “lightning of thought has penetrated deeply into this virgin soil of the people” (MER, p. 65). Once Marx had made his empirical turn of 1845, however, he repudiated any notion of philosophy’s leading role and gave primacy to the proletariat, which schools the philosopher rather than the reverse. In the third “Thesis on Feuerbach,” he turned against the doctrine “dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society” and argued that the “changing of circumstances . . . can be comprehended and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice” (MER, p. 144). “Thought” now *is* “material reality” in terms of its ontological status, and both thought and reality are actively led by the proletariat. Revolts like that of the Silesian weavers, coupled with emerging labor militancy of the “hungry ‘40s,” led Marx and Engels to the robust confidence of *The Communist Manifesto* where they argued that “for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusion, it [the bourgeoisie] has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation . . . and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (MER, pp. 475–6).

But the revolutions of 1848 failed, and it was Marx who, “with sober senses,” concluded in 1851 that bourgeois society was not stripping itself of false appearances, that the bourgeoisie was not history’s great demystifier but had, on the contrary, found the means, symbolized by Louis Napoleon, to reestablish the old mystifications of “the sabre and the cowl” (MER, p. 597). The bourgeoisie did not demystify because it retained a political and ideological capacity to cover over what its relentless economic exploitation unearthed. Not surprisingly, then, Marx returned in the 1850s to a sharp distinction between surfaces and depths. Appearances *were* deceptive. The proletariat was not self-schooled by the labor process. Theory was necessary, and perhaps crises too, to awaken it out of its slumber. While *The German Ideology* assumed a social reality that was self-clarifying, and could therefore dismiss philosophical talk of underlying “essences” in favor of a self-sufficient empirical analysis

of social appearances, the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* reintroduced the appearance–essence dichotomy in order to distinguish two levels of social reality, the one representing society for ordinary (fetishized) consciousness, the other representing society as Marx’s science of political economy reconstructed it. Grasping this second, deeper level of social reality became the task of historical understanding and the key to future political transformation.

Likewise, contemporary political developments also prompted Marx to reassess the theoretical status of history. In *The German Ideology*, he assumed that empirical history was largely self-sufficient for the task of social analysis, and he went so far as to prefigure his future intellectual work essentially in terms of the activity of the historian. Theoretical “difficulties,” he argued there, could be removed “only [by] the study of the actual life-process and the activity of the individuals of each epoch” (MER, p. 155). But beginning in 1857 with the *Grundrisse*, a social theory occupying the deep level of analysis that philosophy had assumed in 1844 became the key to resolving the difficulties presented by the welter of empirical histories. The *Grundrisse* and *Capital* offered theoretical analyses of the unfolding of capitalism and theoretical models of its inner workings. They revealed a broad and intimate familiarity with capitalism’s complex history but made no effort to present that complex history. Marx did not pursue these analyses because of any inherent interest in the variety of case histories upon which they drew, nor indeed in their problems or material components (he had little interest in economics for its own sake). Instead, he believed that a social theory of capitalism carried fundamental significance for modern politics and that modern politics could be properly redirected only by means of an understanding of how capitalism has developed, how it works, and how it might be overcome.

Marx set out the methodological premises of this theoretical enterprise most fully in the 1857 preface to the *Grundrisse*. Here he first separated himself from Hegel through a distinction between the “concrete” and the “concrete in the mind.” Hegel, he wrote, succumbed to the illusion that “concrete” life or “the real,” being the product of the human spirit, developed from the abstract to the concrete in precisely the same pattern as did “thought” or the “concrete-in-the-mind.” In other words, Hegel’s dialectic was both a description of “the process by which the concrete itself comes into being” (MER, pp. 237–8) and an intellectual method. But such a formulation, Marx argued, confused the movement from abstract to concrete that is “abstract” (in the sense of being a “concrete in the mind” or thought reconstruction “in the head”) with the movement from abstract to concrete that is “concrete” (that is, the unfolding of empirical history). The distinction is crucial. For though the logical development of a thought-whole always proceeds from the abstract to concrete (i.e. from simple to complex and mediated), the development of the actual concrete sometimes follows this pattern but sometimes does not.

Thus, to recall Marx's examples, the historical movements from possession to property, and from money to capital, have exhibited the simple-to-complex pattern in all historical cases up to now. However, as Inca civilization demonstrates, complex economic forms such as "cooperation" or a "developed division of labor" have sometimes existed before simpler forms such as money, thus producing the reverse pattern.

Yet the historical implications of this critique were much more far-reaching than any catalog of errors about historical causation or progression would suggest. Because for Hegel the concrete-in-the-mind and the actual concrete were one and the same, he could assume that a conceptual presentation of historical logic was necessarily the same as the events themselves. Hegel's historical works, therefore, read as relentless unfoldings of tripartite, dialectical patternings in which the role of actual historical events became merely illustrative of a higher philosophical meaning. Marx, in contrast, could never assume that historical events would fit the pattern of his theoretical construction. The latter was certainly based on historical understanding, but its status was that of an abstract, conceptual facsimile of historical reality, one useful for investigating, interpreting, and explaining it, and therefore for gaining critical leverage on it, but never to be mistaken for an empirical history. Therefore, for Marx, empirical histories were crucial not only for correcting potential flaws in the general model but also for understanding specific cases, which, as concrete particulars, were always expected to depart from generic patterns. Theory, as the epigraph from Engels asserts, should guide the study of history but could never replace it.

Because the developmental logic of concrete cases so often differs both from theoretical models and from one another, Marx also rejected Hegel's notion of historical teleology. This was the second major premise of the preface to the *Grundrisse*. History could not be reconstructed in forward motion, as the early Marx himself had done even as late as *The German Ideology*, but must proceed, in effect, backwards. "Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape," Marx wrote in an oft-quoted line, yet one could not reliably move from ape to man (MER, p. 241). Evolutionary histories, Marx argued in the *Grundrisse*, invariably mislead. Such histories assume that theoretical categories can be treated as historical constants, yet these categories always in fact bear an important relation to the mode of production in which they originate. And since categories are always internally related to other categories within a mode of production, it is uncritical to assume that they can be treated as being identical to their apparent counterparts in later modes of production where the elements to which they are internally related may be very different. The category of labor, for example, means one thing in feudal society, quite another in capitalist society. Historical analyses which fail to recognize such critical distinctions are likely to fall into the whiggish trap in which "the latest form [of society] regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself, and since it is

only rarely . . . able to criticize itself . . . always conceives them one-sidedly” (MER, p. 242).

In the *Grundrisse*, then, Marx’s goal was not a universal history and certainly not a Hegelian history that read the long progression of past events as producing the present as a “result.” Rather his goal was a theoretical presentation of the genealogy and anatomy of capitalism as a mode of production. And this presentation reflected a third and final premise of the 1857 preface: that the “method of presentation” represents a retracing (in reverse order) of the steps encountered during investigative research. Research sets out to understand complex entities like the capitalist mode of production by examining the elements of which it is composed (like social classes), and then, in turn, by examining the ever simpler elements of which they are composed (like wage labor and capital) until we finally arrive at the simplest elements (like exchange value, prices, needs) which reveal the innermost connections of the object under investigation. Presentation then turns in the reverse direction and, by beginning with those inner connections of simple elements, progressively unfolds the concrete whole not as “the chaotic conception” with which research began but as a “rich totality of many determinations and relations” (MER, p. 237). If all of this movement, forward and back, is successfully negotiated, we will have not a history but a theoretical model which, as Marx conceded, “may appear as if we had before us a mere a priori construction” (MER, p. 301). Yet, so long as it is properly understood as a provisional map rather than the actual territory, this “material world . . . translated into a form of thought” will offer a powerful investigative tool for subsequent historical inquiry. Neither the *Grundrisse* nor *Capital* offered a substitute for history; rather they aimed to open it to a rigorous examination that would be fruitful both analytically and politically. In short, for Marx, social theory must precede the empirical study of history, but historical realities must also be permitted to challenge and revise theory.

Such are the methodological premises that guided these two theoretical works. In *Capital*, the care with which Marx pursued his logic of presentation was especially evident. He began with a close analysis of the nature of the commodity form precisely because he regarded it as modern capitalism’s simplest category in which its innermost connections became visible. From the commodity form, he then reconstructed the capitalist mode of production moving from the more abstract categories of the “money form” to the increasingly complex, concrete workings of capital at the level of the individual enterprise and the national and international economy. With this reconstruction, Marx believed he had exposed the exploitation hidden in the apparent contractual equality of the capitalist relations of production, and while his reconstruction certainly applied to the histories of all capitalist societies and depended upon historical insights gleaned from studying bourgeois societies, he did not regard it as anything like a history of those societies. His analysis ignored, for example,

the ways in which elements of precapitalist modes of production lingered on under capitalism. Yet, he believed that his theoretical analysis would help historians interested in the concrete workings of actual capitalist societies to appreciate their historical mix of capitalist and precapitalist elements.

Of more immediate concern to Marx, however, were the political ramifications of his analysis in *Capital*. He believed that his account offered workers an analytical and developmental but non-teleological understanding of the mode of production that governs their individual lives. Grasping its inner connections, they would come to recognize themselves in it and, thereby, break through fetishized consciousness to an historical understanding of the sources and nature of their exploitation and, finally, to the political engagement through which they would produce a socialist alternative and, ultimately, a communist society. Yet the late Marx did not consistently adhere to this approach to politics. While his letters to Engels after 1848 often implied that the workers would undertake political action, they also sometimes suggested a skepticism about the educability of the working class. And while this skepticism was never explicitly linked to an economic and technological determinist position, his later statements do suggest that Marx sometimes planted his hopes in an automatic working out of historical processes as much as or more than in an emerging theoretical consciousness in the proletariat.

This determinist or nomological conception of history is suggested by allusions Marx made, usually in prefaces and afterwords, to “laws . . . working with iron necessity toward inevitable results” (MER, p. 296) and the like. Its fullest articulation came in the 1859 preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, a text that has assumed canonical status especially among so-called “orthodox” Marxists, which probably explains why its view of history is so commonly associated with Marx’s name. According to this view, history involves the progressive development of the “forces of production” (raw materials, technology, labor, and related knowledge). As those forces become more and more efficient, people are progressively freed from the need to rely on unwanted labor to satisfy their needs. In the earliest modes of production, this “realm of necessity” remains large and people must work all the time just to meet their physical needs. Gradually, as new technologies develop, small surpluses are produced and at least some people can enter a “realm of freedom.” This emergence of class division implies new “relations of production” (structures of ownership and authority). In the capitalist mode of production, industrial technologies permit mass production and a rather large surplus, but its relations of production continue to limit the realm of freedom to the few. Nonetheless, these relations prove stable in the short run because they are reinforced by “legal and political superstructures” as well as by ideological forms of consciousness corresponding to them. In the long run, however, the inherent contradiction between inegalitarian productive relations and powerful (potentially egalitarian) productive forces will produce an “epoch of social

revolution” in which workers (those who sell their “labor power” for a wage) transform the “entire immense superstructure” and produce a general solution to the class antagonisms that have hitherto governed all societies. Private ownership of the means of production will be abolished and the productive forces will be unleashed for the benefit of all humankind rather than only for a small class of capitalists. While a small realm of necessity will always persist, everyone will now become freed from it to the same degree.

In this account, then, history threatens to return to the Hegelian assumption that historical events merely illustrate the unfolding of a higher philosophical logic. The most basic historical forces are large-scale institutional ones that are “independent of their [men’s] will” (MER, p. 4). While historical investigation is not precluded, its basic contours seem determined in advance. Those who read *Capital* with this view of history in mind therefore see its theoretical account as revisable only in terms of how and when it reaches its appointed end, not whether it will do so. And, for that reason, according to this account workers need not read and understand *Capital*; they must merely play out the historical role it assigns them, whether they do it consciously or unconsciously.

There seems to be little doubt that Marx held two differing sets of expectations about the political overcoming of capitalism, one predicated on an activist proletariat consciously making its history, the other on the more impersonal working out of preordained historical tendencies. Each corresponded to certain beliefs Marx held, and he never openly confronted and decisively made the suppressed political choice they implied. Because of this equivocation, there are also two plausible interpretative extremes regarding what Marx meant when he asserted his famous claim for the primacy of economic forces in history, that is, the claim that “the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general” (MER, p. 4). At the strong end of the interpretative continuum, economic primacy implies that history is fundamentally the progressive development of the forces of production which, quite independently of human intentional activity, determine all historical outcomes “in the last analysis” and by a wholly objective process. At the weak end, economic primacy implies only that history, being human history, is made in accordance with human anthropology. As we have seen, in this anthropology man is in essence a producing animal, where production refers to creative life activity in general and not merely the sphere of labor for exchange. In this view, then, human experience is primarily creative activity in which thought and other aspects of culture emerge, much in the way that for Sigmund Freud the symbolic imagination that produces dream content is ultimately bound up with available experience. What is not first produced cannot be thought just as what is not first experienced cannot be dreamt.

In a famous letter of 1890 to Joseph Bloch, Engels tried to clarify what it meant to call a conception of history “materialist” by saying that “the *ulti-*

mately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life” (MER, p. 760). In so doing, he meant to make room for historical explanations based on a wide variety of factors other than “economic” ones. The study of social life, he implied, involves recognizing a complex interplay of structural forces, meanings produced by cultural experience, and individual thought and action. Yet, like Marx, he did not make clear whether this interplay was ultimately governed by economic primacy in the strong or weak sense, and we will probably do best simply to recognize that Marx and Engels were equivocal here. Likewise, it would seem to make little sense to try to determine which one among the various styles of Marxist history writing that have prevailed among historians is the most faithful to Marx. The early Marx viewed history in a metaphysical light; after 1845 his approach was invariably empirical. But his later views of history still varied widely in terms of how economic-determinist they were, how human-centered or impersonal-institutional they were, and whether they regarded history in an evolutionary way or were restricted to a theoretical appraisal of capitalist society in which the key to the anatomy of the ape lay in man and not the other way around.

Only this much can be said with certainty: despite the diversity in his approaches to understanding history and its significance, Marx himself always wrote theoretically informed history with a sharply empirical bent. Moreover, these histories were scrupulously non-reductive and the strong sense of economic primacy nowhere governed them. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, his most widely quoted historical pamphlet, Marx brilliantly deployed a famous vignette about history repeating itself “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce” in order to prefigure his thesis about the fears experienced by “late” generations of revolutionary actors who, “just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things . . . anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past . . . to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language” (MER, pp. 594–5). Yet the thesis itself was established through a rigorous, empirical analysis of events in France, 1848–52. Likewise, in his two other historical narratives on revolutionary events in France – *The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850* and *The Civil War in France*, which takes up the Paris Commune of 1871 – Marx consistently worked through the empirical record with great care to arrive at a larger theoretical argument, which he then presented as an opening thesis. In this way, his histories treated the method of presentation as the reverse of the logic of investigation just as he advised in the *Grundrisse*. Standing behind these local histories lie broad historical expectations about revolutionary outcomes and presuppositions about their historical causes, all of which reflect Marx’s theoretical understanding of the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production. Yet, while these factors surely guided his view of the deepest meanings in contemporary events, they were never used to explain obscure empirical connections or otherwise imposed upon events. In his actual histories,

then, Marx remained truer to his critique of Hegel than in some of his more rhetorical pronouncements.

Marx and Later Marxist Historians

The same can be said for most if not all of the professional historians who trace their central commitments to Marx's influence. While economic determinist views of history have been popular among some Marxist theorists and academic philosophers, they have only rarely been used in the actual writing of Marxist history (and then with disastrous results). Marxist history is necessarily informed by Marxist theory; indeed it is from this theory that it derives its unique strengths. Theory provides a rational, orienting structure to the Marxist historian's presuppositions and expectations, but, as prominent modern students of hermeneutics like Hans Georg Gadamer remind us, some such set of presuppositions and expectations is always present at the outset of interpretation. Moreover, Marxist historians have been no less rigorous than other historians in recognizing that theory must always be revisable on the basis of historical inquiry. Any historical investigation must stand on its own in the sense of being governed entirely by available documentary evidence. Where conclusions are reached that show the inadequacy of received theoretical categories, it is the latter that must be revised. Theory and history, then, represent mutually reinforcing exercises whose logics and practices are nonetheless distinct.

If the strong sense of economic primacy is generally absent from Marxist history, it is also true that the twentieth-century Marxist theorists regarded today as the most imaginative developers of Marxist theory – most of whom wrote at least some history – have moved it in non-reductive directions respectful of the importance of culture as well as social structure for the comprehension of human thought and action. Foremost among these in the early twentieth-century was the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. Writing in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917, Gramsci was impressed by the relative absence in Russia of the complex civil societies that characterized western European nations. In Russia the state could be seized in an act of force because it was not supported by, and interconnected with, the vast array of cultural organizations, ideologies, beliefs, and social and political rituals that provided Western states with their legitimacy. Underdeveloped states like czarist Russia simply “dominated” their populations; the more advanced states of the West ruled primarily by “consent” grounded in “civil society.”

Likewise, Gramsci saw the class structures of Western societies as much more complex than in Russia, yet such societies were no less hierarchical and class-divided. Governance by consent was possible because of what Gramsci termed the cultural “hegemony” of the state in civil society. It followed that

if revolutionary parties were to gain power in the West, they would have to pursue a long-term strategy of building an alternative hegemony, that is, a cultural fabric of values, practices, institutions, and symbols with which the popular masses were identified. In this sense, what the Marx of the 1859 preface had called the “superstructures” became the key locus of analysis in Gramsci’s Marxism. And when, imprisoned by Mussolini, Gramsci wrote about the history of the Italian struggle for political independence, it was precisely the failure of the radical parties to forge the cultural allegiances of rural peasants and urban popular classes into a genuine mass movement that most pre-occupied him.

Marx believed that the working class had a latent oppositional consciousness to capitalism, but he had never developed a cultural understanding either of the basis of that consciousness in life or of what would be required to make it fully manifest. Gramsci’s contribution to Marxist historical thought lay precisely here. While Marx could therefore sometimes fall into an understanding of social life that reduced it to large-scale impersonal forces on the one hand and individual thought and behavior on the other, Gramsci moved the cultural ground that lay between these two domains into the center of his social and historical analysis.

Marxist historians who came to prominence in the years of the Cold War, such as Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson, continued to focus on the cultural ground that Gramsci had opened to view. In particular, Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) was an enormously influential example of how to study emerging class consciousness in relation to its basis in a cultural community rather than as any sort of simple reflection of economic circumstances. In his view, the English working class grew out of eighteenth-century traditions of artisanship, a cultural milieu based on values of decency and mutual aid and connected with languages of religious solidarity and social idealism. In this milieu, loyalties were sustained primarily because of a common identification with a way of life rather than out of any utilitarian calculations of class interest. The triumph of Thompson’s book was the magnificent historical detail it amassed to show how a class emerges – not from ideologies imposed from above or from economic crises but out of a matrix of lived cultural experience, that is, out of the routines, rituals, rules of conduct, and celebrations that make up a way of life. It was this way of life that provided fertile soil for new socialist organizations like trade unions and not the other way round.

Both Gramsci and Thompson, however, broadened the cultural dimensions of Marxist history before the full impact of semiotics, structuralism, and other movements in cultural anthropology was registered on the practice of historical writing. If their efforts helped to sustain interest in the Marxist tradition through much of the twentieth century, it is the sociological and historical work of Pierre Bourdieu that has done most to insure that Marx-inspired

historical thinking continues to have a place in the two decades since what is commonly known as the “cultural turn.”

Though Gramsci and Thompson were attentive to the ways in which cultural codes, values, and practices had a reality independent of social forces and structures, they did not always insist on recognizing the way the latter were themselves initially constituted by cultural patterns. Gramsci, for example, sometimes spoke of intellectual groups or political parties as if they were entirely the products of the forces of hegemony in the state and ruling classes. In contrast, Bourdieu explicitly insists that the comprehension of material reality, whether by individuals or groups, is always initially structured by a priori and generally unconscious cultural codes. Modes of perceiving social reality are therefore never immediate and unproblematic, nor are they ever simply imposed from without. Instead, they always begin with an interpretation based on the symbols, values, and meanings that constitute and are constituted by a particular way of life. In modern, capitalist societies, these particular ways of life and their underlying interpretative codes involve different amounts and combinations of what Bourdieu calls “cultural capital” (e.g. education and prestige) and “economic capital” (e.g. wealth and income). Collections of people with similar amounts and combinations of capital, according to Bourdieu, may well coalesce into a self-conscious class, but he takes care not to leap (as he thinks traditional Marxism did) from the “class-on-paper” to the “real” class. Unlike Marx, Bourdieu thinks that classes are generally in the process of realization and almost never get realized.

In Bourdieu’s view, then, class is not a thing-like element of social structure but a cultural code underlying a particular mode of life, which must be understood in relation to cultural codes underlying other modes of life in the same society. As such, his attitude towards class illustrates his effort to build a more symbolically sensitive, Marxist historical theory, one that focuses on what he calls “fields” (as against objective structures) and that accords primacy to the “relations” among the constituent elements of the field rather than on those elements treated objectively and in isolation from one another. As such, it would seem to be a form of Marx-inspired historical theory well suited to the current intellectual climate.

Marxist History Today

Still, when one looks back on the corpus of work done by Marxist historians of the several generations who followed Engels’s call for more Marxist history, one is also likely to be impressed that many of the problems this tradition so vigorously attacked are no longer alive in the way they once were. Revolutions still exist, and certainly much work remains to be done so that we can more fully understand the revolutions of the past. Yet the Marxist expectation that

revolutions would prove emancipatory has been so soured by the experience of the twentieth century that the problem threatens to become “merely historical” rather than theoretically resonant, at least in any positive sense. The point is, of course, compounded by the abject failure of the Soviet Union as a carrier of Marxist hopes. Similarly, industrial proletariats still exist, yet as postindustrial societies come into being, no one is likely to regard them as history’s “final” class in the way Marx did. The same could be said for the historical implications of many other concepts of Marx’s theory. Empirical and material realities, in other words, have increasingly challenged and discredited the theory.

Thus the question inevitably arises: will Marxist theory continue to inform and inspire historians in the way that it has in the past? The answer, I would suggest, depends upon how one defines “Marxist theory.” If one means by it Marx’s own theory in *Capital* and elsewhere, then the answer is surely no. This theory is itself an historical artefact, one that may still be read with profit for insight into Marx’s own era and its immediate aftermath but not as a general guide to contemporary historical inquiry. Yet, as we have seen, Marx himself believed that history – both in the sense of lived events and the written account of them – must be treated as a corrective to theory, and that theory must therefore be continually revised. Thus, if one means by Marxist theory the theoretical efforts of those inspired by Marx to produce a critical theory of modern society, one that is attentive to the advances made in historical theory more generally, then the answer is just as surely yes.

Bourdieu, I have suggested, offers a particularly supple example of current Marx-inspired historical theorizing. Yet there are certainly other theorists concerned to understand the cultural dynamics of the modern capitalist mode of production and the emancipatory potentials they may or may not open up who continue to be very influential upon historians. First-generation theorists of the Frankfurt School, such as Max Horkheimer and, especially, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, have inspired countless histories, particularly of the origins and dynamics of modern “mass culture.” Equally influential has been the work of the second-generation Frankfurt School theorist, Jürgen Habermas, especially his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), which has transformed the field of Enlightenment history and produced a rich historiographical literature in addition to inspiring many monographs.² In each of these cases, Marxist history has come to mean the project of writing history informed by a critical theory of modern society that remains informed by Marx’s intellectual dispositions and values but that largely abandons Marx’s own theoretical writings as a direct guide to historical inquiry.

In making this move, historians working in the Marxist tradition pursue a trajectory begun by Marx himself. Marx’s earliest conception of history was teleological. Metaphysically based, it was also subject to empirical investigation. This combination of religio-metaphysical and scientific-secular assump-

tions exploded in 1845 when Marx accepted a purely secular, immanent view of history. History now became “real, positive science,” and metaphysical language about emerging essences disappeared. Yet, while Marx may have imagined the end of philosophy in 1845, philosophy returned to his work in a purely secular guise as “theory” after the disappointments of 1848. Derived from a mix of historical investigation and critical analysis of the categories that such investigations expose, theory for the mature Marx became the essential guide to the infinite manifold of human experience. Historical events, in Engels’s later words, were always to be “studied afresh,” but based on pre-suppositions and expectations drawn from theory. Historical study, which informed theory in the first place, became a continuous correction upon it. While, as we have seen, Marx’s politics led him into some equivocation about how fundamentally theory would ever be corrected by historical events, even in his most nomological moments Marx would not have denied in principle the correctability of theory by history. And although Marx almost certainly never imagined that the fundamental contours of a theory of the capitalist mode of production might change, he left open the possibility that they might. Thus the theory that initially replaced philosophy in the role of a relatively fixed knowledge becomes as revisable as the histories it seeks to guide.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the long history of Marxist historical inquiry since Marx’s death has made necessary the continuous revamping of theory as much as it has provoked the writing and rewriting of history itself. That is as it should be. One does not expect empirical histories simply to replicate theory. Indeed, such histories are vital and necessary precisely because they reveal elements of reality that theory does not discuss. So long as history appears to “flesh out” or complicate reality as understood by theory, no necessary revision of the latter is suggested. Even when a particular history shows theory to be misleading or counterproductive for the understanding of that case, theory is not necessarily in need of revision. For it may be that what is anomalous in a particular case comes to light only because of the theory’s existence; this is the sense in which, as we say in everyday life, “the exception proves the rule.” It is when the exceptions show that we have the wrong rules – when historical cases cast doubt on the fundamental categories of the theory and their relationship to one another – that history demands the revision of theory.³

Yet anyone surveying the horrendous misery and hitherto unimaginable carnage that twentieth-century actors have produced in Marx’s name will likely recognize that the relation of history and theory in Marxism has only rarely been saved from distortion by politics. Indeed, it is through tracing the connections among theory, history, and politics in Marx’s own writings that one can locate their tragic connection to the misery and carnage that came in their wake. While it would be unreasonable to hold Marx fully responsible for the

sins of his later followers, there is also little doubt that his conception of theory contained a tragically fateful duality. As a successor to philosophy, one in which philosophy is faulted for having “only interpreted the world in various ways” rather than changing it (MER, p. 145), theory was conceived by Marx as an orientation both for political action and for historical investigation. As we have seen, these two purposes can lead to equivocation and obscurity. Should Marx’s late work be read fundamentally in light of the open-ended, historical premises set out in the 1857 preface to the *Grundrisse* or those of the more rigid, determinist 1859 preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*? The premises themselves are mutually contradictory, deriving as they do from different political understandings of the nature and usefulness of theory. Yet this equivocation and obscurity have proven to be far from a merely “theoretical” matter. Marx’s belief that theory could offer a comprehensive orientation for practice was grandiose, illusory, and partly responsible for the subsequent, political catastrophes that have befallen humankind. Clearly, this belief must be jettisoned. Marx’s notion of the mutual interaction of theory and history for the benefit of understanding human life is of great value – but only when purged of any faith that an abstract theory can provide a comprehensive guide to political action. That theoretically, informed history may prevent us from repeating this or that mistake of the past, and help clarify an approach to this or that problem in the future is certainly to be hoped. But the idea that historical theory can and ought to lead to a totalistic revamping of human life was the twentieth century’s foremost recipe for disaster.

NOTES

- 1 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx–Engels Reader*, ed. R. C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 145; hereafter cited in the text as MER.
- 2 On Habermas’s work and historians, see especially Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992).
- 3 For an exemplary case in which historical investigation, albeit by a sociologist, demanded the revision of theory, albeit theory as held by a Marxist historian, see Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

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