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How Marx Got Rid of Historical Materialism

Marx's 200th anniversary did not pass unnoticed as a considerable fuss surrounded the late thinker's remembrance. However, the question of what Marx's theoretical significance actually consists of and for what he ought to be honoured lingers unaddressed. Can his importance be found in a new "*theory* of history, which is not" – as was Marx's charge against Hegel – "a reflective construal, from a distance, of what happens, but a contribution to understand its inner dynamics" (G.A. Cohen 1978: 27; original emphasis). Or shall we honour Marx for the discovery of a "*true method* by which to understand society and history" (Lukács 1972 [1922]: xliii; original emphasis). In the following paragraphs, we object to these classical views, which are far from dead. Instead, we argue that Marx was a materialist philosopher and critical social scientist who vigorously challenged historical overgeneralisations and aimed at the production of sound knowledge about social macro-dynamics and historical events. His ability to generate such knowledge is a result of his efforts throughout a process of lifelong learning and especially his revision of what generations of Marxists have considered to be the core of his writings, i.e. Historical Materialism. In order to consolidate this argument, we firstly analyse the main ideas of Historical Materialism as well as their emergence within Marx's work. Secondly, we address some of their theoretical and political implications. Thirdly, we demonstrate how Marx himself became (more or less explicitly) aware of said implications and eventually overcame them. Throughout our argument, we focus especially on the implications of this development on Marx's understanding of the Global South.

I. Historical Materialism in Marx's Work

To avoid any misunderstanding, let us start with a conceptualisation of Historical Materialism and its location in Marx's work.

What is Historical Materialism?

What do we mean when we speak of Historical Materialism? We do not follow vague and somewhat insincere claims advocating for Historical Materialism as a powerful hypothesis "to study social process in its totality" (Thompson 1995 [1978]: 95), or to be a "Marxist science of the development of social formations" (Althusser 2005 [1965]: 168). We rather consider what generations of Marxists have commonly understood by Historical Materialism and what has been reconstructed with unprecedented conceptual rigor by G.A. Cohen (1978).

The basic framework of Historical Materialism can be found in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. (Marx 1859: 263)

The central concepts of Historical Materialism are – as this passage suggests – *productive forces* (the “material” infrastructure of the means of production and labour power: technology, knowledge and skills), *relations of production* (the economic structure, “the real foundation”: social class relations of effective command over the means of production and labour power), *mode of production* (the ensemble of productive forces and relations of production) and *superstructure* (legal and political institutions and – perhaps – “forms of social consciousness”). Marx uses these concepts in order to establish “three *dynamical* laws” (J. Cohen 1982: 258) of history:

- 1) There is an ongoing tendency, in history, of the productive forces to grow. That is, more and more wealth can be produced with less and less labour time.
- 2) The existence and maintenance of certain production relations is dependent on their capacity to foster the optimal development of the productive forces.
- 3) The existence and maintenance of certain superstructures is dependent on their capacity to adequately reproduce the production relations that are required for the maximal expansion of the productive forces.

As G.A. Cohen (1978: 134-74) has shown, these three dynamical laws give rise to two fundamental tenets of Historical Materialism, one being ontological, the other epistemological. The ontological tenet is what Cohen calls the “development thesis”: The productive forces tend to develop in history. They replace productivity fettering structures and superstructures with fostering ones. The epistemological tenet is what Cohen dubbed the “primacy thesis”: The explanatory primacy of the productive forces accounts for the stability and change of economic structures; the corresponding primacy of economic structures accounts for the stability and change of the legal etc. superstructures.

In addition to these two fundamental tenets, Historical Materialism has three main features:

- 1) There is a progressive succession, in history, of different modes of production: “Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois” (Marx 1859: 263).
- 2) The adjustment of economic structures and legal, political etc. superstructures to the development of the productive forces is mediated by class struggle.
- 3) There are privileged historical agents carrying out this adjustment. Marx mentions at least three: the bourgeoisie, the proletariat and the British Empire as the world’s political expansion of the bourgeoisie.

This view of history has its precursors. One that is often neglected is the Scottish Enlightenment with its echo in France, mainly in Turgot's work. These authors developed the so-called four stages theory of history, which considers history to be a non-arbitrary succession of development stages. The key factor here is the mode of subsistence, which is accounted for in technological terms: hunting, pasturage, agriculture, and commerce. As Ronald Meek pointed out, "different ideas and institutions relating to both property and government [corresponding to each stage], and in relation to each, general statements could be made about the state of manners and morals, the social surplus, the legal system, the division of labour, and so on" (Meek 1970: 19). Another source of Historical Materialism is Saint Simonism which propagated the class concept following the French Revolution of 1830 (Eiden-Offe 2017: 136-62). And finally, there is Hegel's philosophy of history. We can neither delve into it here, nor discuss the complex relationship between Marx and Hegel. However, there are at least two ideas that Marx's Historical Materialism adopts from Hegel: First, there are privileged historical agents like Napoleon and the Prussian bureaucracy that carry out the tasks of the "world spirit." Second, world history, in the last instance, is a rational process resolving the ethical problem of the theodicy. Hegel's "*cunning of reason*" captures the idea that the particular may perish in the process of world history but that "it is from this very conflict and destruction of particular things that the universal emerges, and it remains unscathed itself" (Hegel 1830: 89). The presence of this idea is obvious when Marx declares British colonialism to be the "unconscious tool of history," fulfilling mankind's destiny by causing a social revolution in India – "whatever may have been the crimes of England" (Marx 1853b: 132).

The Development of Marx's Work

It is important to situate Marx's Historical Materialism within the development of his own work. What we suggest is a refinement of Althusser's (2005 [1965]: 35) periodization of Marx's oeuvre that is organised around an "epistemological break" taking place in 1845-46. With his *Theses on Feuerbach* and the *German Ideology*, co-authored with Engels, Marx could have realized, as Althusser claims, a transition from "ideology" to "science". As this break is not free from ambivalences, Marx supposedly underwent a phase of "maturation" up until 1857, before writing his "mature works." Althusser's prominent argument undoubtedly had its merits, but it fails to capture what is actually happening in Marx's work in 1845-46: not an epistemological, but a philosophical break (U. Lindner 2011). By this time, Marx does not pass from ideology to science, but replaces one social philosophy (Young-Hegelianism) with another (a realist social philosophy). Whereas Marx as a Young Hegelian had been concerned with the problematic of the "actualisation" (*Verwirklichung*) and "sublation" (*Aufhebung*) of philosophy, at the centre of his realist social philosophy, his "new materialism," lies in what may be called in terms of current social theory a "naturalist social ontology": as parts of nature or the "earth" (Latour 2018), social structures, human actors and artefacts are entities with emergent properties in their own right. One cannot reduce them to each other, nor conflate them

with “practice” as was later argued by Pierre Bourdieu or Anthony Giddens for instance (U. Lindner 2013: 124-85).

What Althusser vaguely called the “stage of maturation” was in fact a fundamental ambivalence of Marx’s philosophical break: initially, Marx is not able to separate his new realist social philosophy from Historical Materialism. Thus, the latter remains a strong tendency in his work until at least 1859. During this period, there exists, however, another great transition in Marx’s work: a shift to the social sciences. In his London exile from 1850 onwards, he starts to truly engage with empirical facts and figures. Following this effort, Marx discovers in the late 1850’s “the pivot on which a clear comprehension of political economy turns” (Marx 1867: 51), i.e. the twofold character of the labour embodied in commodities. This implies that theories that are based on a conception of “production in general” are unsound and meaningless speculations. As it is well known, Marx continues to work on his critique of political economy until the end of his life. We situate Marx’s overcoming of Historical Materialism in the late 1860’s when, amongst other things, he starts learning Russian in order to understand social structures and historical developments in the periphery of capitalism. The refinement of Althusser’s scheme takes the following form:

1841-1844: Young-Hegelian social philosophy
1845/46: Philosophical break and emergence of a realist social philosophy
1846-1859: Peak of Historical Materialism
1850-1858: Transition to social science
1859-1883: Critique of political economy
1868-1883: Overcoming of Historical Materialism. (U. Lindner 2013: 19)

Obviously, there is overlap in this scheme. This is unsurprising as every new theoretical discovery is accompanied by inconsistency. One should avoid pressing Marx into a scheme that is more coherent than the actual development of his work was.¹

II. The Problems of Historical Materialism

¹ For the sake of completeness, we want to point out that there is already a certain philosophy of history in young Marx. It is not yet Historical Materialism but rather linked to the Young-Hegelian problematic of the “actualization” of philosophy, which – as young Marx stresses – has to be accompanied by its “sublation.” Marx tries to anchor this idea politically in the supposedly universal subject of the working class seen as “a class with *radical chains*:” a class in a social sphere “which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society” (Marx 1844a: 186; original emphasis). Here, one can already see the privileging of class relations over other forms of social inequality. This prepares the latter idea that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx/Engels 1848: 482). Other modes of social conflict are not conceived of as preeminent historical forces. Furthermore, there is a fascinating philosophy of history in the *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844 covering both nature and humankind and propagating communism as a form of universal reconciliation, a sublation of every alienation, i.e. “the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature” (Marx 1844b: 296; original emphasis).

We want to stress three problems of Historical Materialism – functionalist teleology, anti-ethics and Eurocentrism – which are normally not brought together.

Functionalist Teleology

Marx's Historical Materialism constantly commits two sins that Marx himself was able to reveal with relentless clarity, when criticizing Hegel, the Young-Hegelians and classical political economy. First, it proposes "a recipe or schema [...] for neatly trimming the epochs of history" (Marx/Engels 1845: 37). Second, it is an endless anachronism, ascribing specific features of the present to the past and thus producing false historical overgeneralizations. To put it differently, both fundamental arguments of Historical Materialism, the development and the priority theses, are untenable. Together they constitute what we call a functionalist teleology.

Let us start with the development thesis. As Joshua Cohen (1982) has pointed out in his review of G.A. Cohen's reconstruction, this approach to Historical Materialism faces two devastating criticisms. First, it is simply not true that there is an ongoing historical tendency of the productive forces to grow. In both European and extra-European contexts, we find phases of relative growth and decline of the productive forces, by no way constituting a linear directionality. The constant development of the productive forces, by contrast, is a specific feature of the capitalist mode of production that Historical Materialism projects on the entire human history.

Second, and in order to immunize the development thesis against historical evidence, Historical Materialism has to seek refuge in yet another tenet that Alan Buchanan has called the "Practical Rationality Thesis (PR): Human beings are practically rational at least in the sense that they have sufficient intelligence and motivation to develop means for satisfying their desires, including those desires that arise in the process of satisfying their initial desires" (Buchanan 1987: 108-109). Or, as G.A. Cohen stated: "we put it as a reason for affirming the development thesis that its falsehood would offend human rationality" (Cohen 1978: 153). Yet, the problem with this claim is that the material interest in need of satisfaction does not necessarily have to translate into productivity enhancing behaviour. There is no automatism for this, neither on the individual, nor on the collective level. The practical rationality thesis, when used to support the development thesis, turns out to be nothing short of "a dogmatic profession of faith" (Buchanan 1987: 110).

The teleology of the development thesis leaves only very limited space for the contingencies of class struggle. In fact, class conflicts only carry out an already known pattern of development. For this reason, Marxists like Althusser, E.P. Thompson or Antonio Negri, have rejected the development thesis. However, their assumption of an a priori priority of class struggle over other modes of social conflict only makes sense when the development thesis or some other kind of philosophy of history is presupposed.

Let us turn to the priority thesis. Historical Materialism has never been a technological determinism. Marx, Engels and even Stalin have always emphasised the genuine causal contribution of economic, legal, political etc. structures to the development of the productive forces. If this proper causal role is recognized, how can

the claim of the explanatory primacy of the productive forces be maintained? G.A. Cohen has solved this problem by clarifying that the priority thesis of Historical Materialism implies a commitment to functional explanations (Cohen 1978: 249-96). According to him, these explanations are consequence explanations wherein the “reference to the effects of phenomenon contributes to explaining it” (250). They answer to *why*-questions. Functional statements become explanatory when supported by a *consequence law*, “a universal conditional statement whose antecedent is a hypothetical causal statement” (259): “*were an event of a certain type to occur, it would have a certain effect*” (261; original emphasis). For Cohen, and this is his decisive manoeuvre at this point, a strong confirmation of functional explanations is possible even without establishing a mechanism that explains the actual working of the consequence law.²

Following this line of argument, Historical Materialism’s functional explanations should not be confused with functionalism in the sense of declaring society to be normatively integrated whole. However, Cohen has ignored that functional explanations induce an epistemological strategy that has been aptly called “techno-functionalism” by Robert Brenner (1989). These are speculative and uncontrollable claims about the dispositional properties of social entities with regard to their capacity of fostering/fettering development of the productive forces. And it is exactly this that seems to be the main epistemological evil of Historical Materialism. Interestingly, epistemological functionalism is reproduced even where the technological bias of Historical Materialism has been overcome, i.e. in Althusser and the German state-derivation debate. Here, speculative and uncontrollable claims about the dispositional properties of superstructural social entities with regards to their capacity to reproduce the existing relations of production are endlessly reasserted.

Anti-Ethics

A second problem of Historical Materialism is that it can be genuinely anti-ethical in its orientation. As world-historical progress, in the last instance, will persist, social critique does not need to develop proper ethical standards. In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels state: “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the now existing premise” (Marx/Engels 1845: 49; original emphasis). What might have been important to Marx as it concerns political

² It should be noted that Cohen, in his later debate with Jon Elster, became himself very skeptical of Historical Materialism’s capacity to confirm functional explanations by consequence laws: “whereas Elster and I disagree strongly about what would confirm functional explanations, we disagree less about whether Marxists have actually produced well-confirmed functional explanations” (Cohen 1982: 491). Historical Materialism seems to be in acute danger of complete failure: “If links with action cannot be forged, if the question *how* the functional explanations of historical materialism explain cannot even in principle be answered, then that would have lethal significance for historical materialism” (490).

constellations, i.e. to ban a moralism that individualizes socio-structural problems, turns into an anti-ethical device that claims a superior realism through insight into the irresistible development of history. The proletariat must only work on the lessening of capitalism's agony, to free the fully developed productive forces from their fetters. Philosophically speaking, this is an uncontrolled consequentialism sanctioning every means to reach a certain purpose: we should not shy away from getting our hands dirty as long as it is for the higher purpose of communism. This view is obvious in the early 1850's when Marx and Engels argue that the workers should strive "for the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority. They must not allow themselves to be misguided by the democratic talk of freedom for the communities, of self-government, etc" (Marx/Engels 1850b: 285).

This kind of thinking goes along with an egregious paternalism. It is the insight into *the* necessity of history that allegedly confers the proletariat a privileged position. Therefore, it is up to the communists to explain "*what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do" (Marx/Engels 1844: 37; original emphasis). What needs to be done is not the outcome of democratic deliberation, but a process supposedly established by laws of history. Those who know these laws are entitled to lead those who have yet to recognize them. The idea of a historical mission is a blueprint for crimes against humanity and nature. We do not have to wait for Stalin's coming, elitist and instrumentalist ideas can already be found in Marx's Historical Materialism.

Eurocentrism

The Eurocentrism Marx articulates within his Historical Materialism is fourfold (K. Lindner 2010). The *first* type is a specific form of ethnocentrism, which presumes Western societies to be superior on all fronts and thus the centre of world history and reason. We can find this sort of Eurocentrism especially in Marx's 1853 writings on India. Here, he argues that the subcontinent shows a low level of social development: an artificial irrigation system created and maintained by a central state, a unity between agriculture and manufactures that limited the development of productivity, an absence of urban centres and private property. Marx considers these structures as foundation of the country's "stagnation" and "oriental despotism" (Marx 1853b: 132). In the same vein, China is conceived of as a "living fossil" (Marx 1862: 216). Social innovation and modernity emerge from Western societies, not from those in the Global South. Indicative of this is the succession by which different modes of production are listed in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* from 1859: at the lower end of the development of the productive forces is the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP). By contrast, Marx clearly relates the other three, progressive modes of production to the West.

The *second* form of Eurocentrism consists of what Edward Said has called Orientalism: a biased way of looking at the non-Western world that has less to do with the real conditions prevailing there and more with the "European Western Experience" (Said 1979: 1) and projections of said experience. This view expresses the economic, political, cultural, and military domination the West has established

over these regions, homogenising and othering them. Marx adopts this Orientalism from his sources; for instance from François Bernier's 1670's travelogue *Voyages contenant la description des états du Grand Mogol*. Marx writes in 1853 to Engels that Bernier "rightly sees all the manifestations of the East – he mentions Turkey, Persia and Hindustan – as having a common basis, namely the *absence of private landed property*. This is the real *clef*, even to the eastern heaven" (Marx 1853a: 333-34; original emphasis). In *Theories of Surplus-Value* written in the early 1860's, Marx still makes a positive allusion to "Dr. Bernier, who compares the Indian towns to army camps. This is due to the form of landed property which exists in Asia" (Marx 1861-63: 357; original emphasis) – here again characterized by the absence of private holders as Marx notes at the same time: "landowner (the State in Asia)" (1861-63: 338).

The *third* kind of Eurocentrism is a direct outcome of Historical Materialism's teleology. It consists of a conception of development that makes the cultural and historical patterns of capitalist Western Europe the established standard for all human history. Subsequently, Marx perceives no autochthonous potential of development in non-Western societies and no creative potential in social upheavals in the non-Western world. In 1853, Marx assumes English colonialism to work on "the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia" (Marx 1853c: 217-18). Here, historical progress is identified with a certain model of development, (the "Western society") which Historical Materialism shares with other philosophies of history. Furthermore, there is a particular pragmatic conception included in the idea that the productive forces developed under British colonial rule could immediately serve the Indian population. This view ignores that for instance infrastructures were constructed in a colonial context, i.e. overdetermined by extraction, so that railways ran from mines to the coasts with no potential of improving the mobility of the colonised through a simple anticolonial takeover. As to the creative potential of the colonised, Marx's Historical Materialism is far from locating any agency in capitalism's periphery. Thus, the Chinese Taiping rebellion is presented as an inferior copy of Western events, illustrated by its alleged motto "République chinoise. Liberté, égalité, fraternité" (Marx/Engels 1850a: 267).³

The *fourth* type of Eurocentrism consists of what proponents of global history have criticized by analysing an omission of non-European history and by arguing for an entangled history of modernity (Stoler/Cooper 1997). In the 1850's, Marx claims that political revolutions in the Global South, i.e. the Taiping Rebellion, only have an economic but no political impact on the West. This is a quite problematic view in the light of research in global history pointing out that "ideological and political conflict

³ The teleological and counterfactual arguments of Historical Materialism are relentlessly illustrated by a certain Marxist literature on Global Affairs (K. Lindner 2019). Hence, Anderson's study on Marx's perspective on non-Western societies exhibits a Hegelian philosophy of history by praising Marx's 1850s analyses of colonialism for being a "withering critique of dialectical reason" (2010: 23). Moreover, Pradella claims that Marx, in his analysis of development on a global scale, "never put in question [...] the dialectical conception of history that underpinned [...] the identification of the contradiction between the development of the productive forces [...] and their private appropriation" (2015: 173).

had [...] achieved a global scale, *before* economic uniformities were established across much of the world” (Bayly 2004: 7; original emphasis). Furthermore, Marx’s Historical Materialism considers rebellions in the Global South to be the simple result of innovations set into motion by colonisation. Thus, in creating a native army “the British rule [...] organized the first general center of resistance which the Indian people was ever possessed of” (Marx 1857: 297-98).

III. The Overcoming of Historical Materialism

In this final part of our article, we aim at showing how Marx increasingly replaced the different features of Historical Materialism we have challenged.

Historical Social Science

When Marx started working empirically as a social scientist, functionalist teleology eventually bore no significance for his scientific endeavour. Trans-historical productivity growth is not a meaningful heuristic for any specified investigation. Instead of searching for functional explanations, Marx, in his actual scientific working mode, employed a twofold explanatory strategy that can be called according to current debates within the philosophy of the social science “retrodictive” and “retroductive” (Elder-Vass 2010). On the one hand, he produced “genealogical” explanations of historical events using a multiplicity of causal factors amongst them unintended social mechanisms as well as purposive collective actions (“retrodiction”). On the other hand, he developed “mechanismic” explanations of the basic processes of what he considered to be the most important social entity of his time: the capitalist mode of production. Central to this epistemological project that Marx called, in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, “historical, social science” (Marx 1857-58: 43) was an interest in the *differentia specifica* of social macro structures and transformative historical events – an interest that stands in fierce opposition to the trans-historical overgeneralizations of Historical Materialism.

Two texts might illustrate this best. The first is Marx’s *18th Brumaire*.⁴ Marx’s account of the failed Revolution of 1848 articulates paradigmatically the retrodictive part of his historical social science. We want to stress two points. First, Marx’s analysis draws on a conception of cultural conditions and transformative practices theorized in the *German Ideology* (U. Lindner 2010: 177-81). Hence, the revolutionaries “conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language” (Marx 1852: 104).

⁴ Written in 1851-52, this essay fully falls within the period when Historical Materialism was strongly pronounced in Marx’s work. However, Marx speaks here as a politically engaged social scientist with a profound historical and political knowledge of France, not as a philosopher of history. The nearly concurrent record of texts as different as the *18th Brumaire* and the 1853 writings on India is the reason why we insist on the tensions, ambivalences and multi-linearity in Marx’s work.

Cultural semantics have causal impact with respect to social practices beyond their alleged (dys-)functionality for the development of the productive forces; they provide a horizon of “names, battle-cries and costumes” (104) historical actors can appropriate and act through. Action is also always a performative act wherein signifying practices relate to existing cultural expressions. The second point concerns class analysis. Marx writes a history of the bourgeoisie that is radically different from the story of a historical master subject told in *The Communist Manifesto*. After 1848, the French bourgeoisie had been divided into different fractions and failed to establish its political power. Overall, Marx develops a structure-action-theoretical approach of social classes best illustrated by his analysis of the small-holding peasants. He argues that they form a class insofar as they “live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter,” but do not do so “as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation among them” (187). This condition would cause their inability to organise politically and enable Bonaparte to capture their representation. Here, contingency and political action replace the very idea of a historical mission that is essential to Historical Materialism.

The second text that illustrates Marx’s break with functionalist teleology is *Capital*. The model of explanation used in his critique of political economy is neither inductive, nor deductive but, as Derek Sayer explains, “retroductive,” i.e. isolating and analysing underlying mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production (D. Sayer 1979: 134-35). In *Capital*, we find an ensemble of action and structure theoretical analyses that particularly focus on mechanisms as iterative processes constituting the dynamics typical of capitalism. Amongst the mechanisms analysed by Marx in the first volume are competitive exchange, the production of surplus value, the increase of the rate of surplus value and accumulation. Two things should be stressed. First, Marx has shown that the constant growth of the productive forces is a specific feature of the capitalist mode of production and does not pertain to “production in general.” He establishes a mechanism of how this process works, thereby demonstrating the redundancy of functional explanations: it is competition within a context of market dependency that channels the rational interest of those having command over the means of production into productivity-enhancing behaviour. Second, and this brings us to our next point, Marx’s mechanistic explanations are associated with “thick ethical concepts” (Williams 1985: 140) like fetishism, exploitation, despotism and pauperisation, which together with his genealogical accounts of “The Struggle for a Normal Working Day” (Marx 1867: 270-307) and “The So-Called Primitive Accumulation” (704-61) give rise to “evaluative descriptions” (A. Sayer 2011: 10) of how people live under capitalism. The social suffering that is revealed by this epistemological strategy cannot be easily brushed aside by pointing to the teleological assumption that eventually, everything will resolve itself – although there are still remnants of Historical Materialism in *Capital Volume I*’s more declarative parts like the last section of the chapter on the so-called primitive accumulation.

Ethics Beyond Theodicy

Whereas Historical Materialism refuses any explicit ethical considerations, things radically change especially in Marx's late work. Once again, two texts clearly illustrate this. The first is Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune. In *The Civil War in France*, Marx advocates an emphatic conception of radical democracy. According to him, the Commune puts an end to the injustice incorporated in the modern bourgeois state, an organ of class domination:

The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, of acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary, body, executive and legislative at the same time. [...] From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at *workmen's wages*. The vested interests and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of State disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves. Public functions ceased to be the private property of the tools of the Central Government. Not only municipal administration, but the whole initiative hitherto exercised by the State was laid into the hands of the Commune. (Marx 1871: 331; original emphasis)

Here we find an outline of the principles of post-capitalist political organisation that is far away from Marx's earlier historico-philosophical and Jacobin considerations of a proletariat "not yet enabled through the development of the remaining classes to seize the revolutionary dictatorship" (Marx 1850: 98). Amongst these principles are universal suffrage, imperative mandate of representatives, accountability, revocability, a "politics of presence," (Phillips 1995) i.e. workers have their own representatives, pay equity and—not unproblematically—an abolition of the separation of powers. These principles are coupled with decentralisation, post-national citizenship and social measures "betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people" (Marx 1871: 339):

the abolition of the nightwork of journeymen bakers; the prohibition, under penalty, of the employers' practice to reduce wages by levying upon their workpeople fines under manifold pretexts [and] the surrender, to associations of workmen, under reserve of compensation, of all closed workshops and factories, no matter whether the respective capitalists had absconded or preferred to strike work. (339)

The second example illustrating late Marx's engagement with ethical issues can be found in his critique of contemporary social democracy. In his review of the Gotha Programme in 1875, Marx discusses distributive and relational egalitarian concerns (U. Lindner 2019). For a transitional period of socialism where relational equality is not yet fully achieved, Marx accepts desert (*Leistung*) as a principle for the distribution of income. By contrast, the principle of need is invoked for a fully developed communism. Now, "the narrow horizon of bourgeois right [can] be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!" (Marx 1875: 87). Most interesting is that Marx does not confine himself to the "contextualist" (Miller 1999) claim that the (hegemonic) validity of distributive justice principles depends on the characteristics of their respective social contexts. Instead, and much in the vein of John Rawls (1971), he engages in a genuinely egalitarian critique of desert as principle of distributive justice:

The right of the producers is proportional to the labour they supply; the equality consists in the fact that measurement is made with an equal standard, labour. But one man is superior to another physically or mentally and so supplies more labour in the same time, or can work for a longer time; and labour, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measurement. This *equal* right is an unequal right for unequal labour. It recognises no class distinctions, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else; but it tacitly recognises the unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity of the workers as natural privileges. *It is, therefore, a right of inequality, in its content, like every right.* Right by its nature can exist only as the application of an equal standard [...]. Besides, one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, etc., etc. Thus, given an equal amount of work done, and hence an equal share in the social consumption fund, one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, etc. To avoid all these defects, right would have to be unequal rather than equal. (Marx 1875: 86-87; original emphasis)

Marx argues here for a moral, not a natural equality of all human beings: despite their “unequal individual endowment,” human beings are of equal moral worth. The problem with the principle of desert is that it recognizes these unequal individual endowments as a “natural privilege,” whereas from an egalitarian point of view they are part of the “natural lottery” (Rawls 1971: 74) and thus morally arbitrary. These arbitrary facts cannot justify distributive inequalities and induce a perversion of equality into a formalist exercise. With this critique of the desert principle, Marx resituates himself within the radical egalitarian and “utopian” currents of French socialism/communism of the late 1830’s and early 1840’s.

To sum up, Marx no longer conceives of social and political justice as a by-product of historico-philosophically guaranteed social change. He rather recognizes the need for a practical design of emancipatory institutions and for genuine ethical reflexion.

Cosmopolitan Communism

Ultimately, Marx revises all four dimensions of Eurocentrism articulated in his Historical Materialism. *First*, Western societies are no longer seen as superior due to their development of the productive forces. Progress becomes a genuinely ethical term, which is linked to the collective organisation of social dependence. Hence, late Marx follows Lewis Morgan who identifies “*Communism in living*” in pre-colonial societies of Northern America (Krader 1974; original emphasis). Pre-capitalistic societies even offer modes of organisation that might be superior to those that follow them – an idea that has an important political consequence. Thus, a free society is characterised by a quote of Morgan’s as “*a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes*” (Krader 1974: 139; original emphasis) and not as the result of historical teleology. Communal ownership of land plays an important role as Marx stresses with regard to the Russian rural commune:

If it possesses in the communal ownership of the soil the basis of collective appropriation, its historical surroundings, its contemporaneity with capitalist production, lend it all the material conditions of communal labour on a vast scale. It is thus in a position to incorporate all the positive acquisitions devised by the capitalist system without passing through its Caudine Forks. It can gradually replace parcel farming with large-scale agriculture assisted by

machines, which the physical lie of the land in Russia invites. It can thus become *the direct point of departure* for the economic system towards which modern society tends, and turn over a new leaf without beginning by committing suicide. (Marx 1881a: 357-58; original emphasis)

With these properties, the Russian agricultural commune could appropriate the fruits “of Western capitalist production” “without subjecting itself to its *modus operandi*” (1881a: 353; original emphasis). If it does, it will become the “fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia” (1881b: 371) or, rather, the “starting point for communist development” (Marx/Engels 1882: 426). It is important to note that this view goes together with an disillusionment about colonialism as opportunity for social progress: “As for the East Indies, for example, everyone [...] realises that the suppression of communal landownership out there was nothing but an act of English vandalism, pushing the native people not forwards but backwards” (Marx 1881a: 365).

Second, by the end of his life, Marx becomes quite critical of his former sources concerning non-Western world regions. In 1879, he notes: “T. Engl. jackasses needed an enormous amount of time to arrive at an even approximate understanding of t. real conditions of t. landed property in the conquered regions” (Marx 1879: 84, original abbreviations). Furthermore, Marx recognizes that the material interests of the colonizers might have biased this “understanding.” Consequently, he remarks on landed property in Algeria: “T. French lust for loot makes obvious sense; if t. government was a. is the original proprietor of t. entire country, then there is no need to acknowledge t. claims of the Arab a. Kabyl tribes to this or that concrete tract of land” (1879: 101; original abbreviations). Finally, Bernier, formerly praised for providing the key to the understanding of Asian countries (the absence of private landed property), is now to blame for his linguistic ignorance: “*In the annals of certain Indian communities*, a source that was essentially unavailable to historians ignorant of Sanskrit, we find evidence of the way private property suddenly sprang up, suddenly and *en masse*, as a result of measures taken by the Rajas and to the detriment of communal property” (1879: 55; original emphasis). Here, Orientalism is replaced by a more realistic account of non-European societies.

Third, Marx no longer considers the patterns of capitalist Western Europe as the established standard for worldwide social development. The latter is rather conceived of as context-sensitive, in a way that is alien to any philosophy of history. This is illustrated by the omnipresent emphasis on the “historical surroundings” of social and political transformations in the drafts of the letters to Vera Zasulich in 1881 and even most explicit when Marx clarifies in 1877 that the “historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe” in the chapter on so-called primitive accumulation in *Capital Volume I*, must not be transformed into “a historic-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed, in order to eventually attain this economic formation which, with a tremendous leap of the productive forces of social labour, assures the most integral development of every individual producer” (Marx 1877: 200). Finally, in the French edition of *Capital Volume I*, Marx revises the idea initially articulated in the German edition of 1867 that “the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future”

(Marx 1867: 9). He now states that “the country that is more developed industrially only shows, *to those which follow it on the industrial path*, the image of its own future” (Marx 1872-75: 12; emphasis added). In sum, late Marx develops a conception of a multi-linear, path-dependent historical development.

Fourth, Marx becomes increasingly aware of global entanglements. In his final years, he sees that the repercussions of break-ups in the colonies on the metropole are political and not only economic. Thus, he writes in March 1870: “To accelerate the social development in Europe, you must push on the catastrophe of official England. To do so, you must attack her in Ireland” (Marx 1870a: 449). A little later, another letter states: “After studying the Irish question for years I have come to the conclusion that the decisive blow against the ruling classes in England (and this is decisive for the workers’ movement ALL OVER THE WORLD) *cannot* be struck in England, *but only in Ireland*” (Marx 1870b: 473; original emphasis). Not only economically, but also politically, England is still in the centre of Marx’s reflections. However, the margins are no longer mere “living fossils.” Instead, Ellen Hazelkorn argues that Marx believes that “Irish nationalism held within itself the key to social reform” (Hazelkorn 1981: 305). Contrary to the analysis of China advocated in Historical Materialism, the political movement in the colonies is now conceived of as being relatively autonomous and influencing the metropole politically. The same view is invoked in the face of social-revolutionary movements in Russia several years later when Marx and Engels state that a Russian revolution could become “the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other” (Marx/Engels 1882: 426).

IV. Conclusion

If Historical Materialism would have been Marx’s final word, we would not have much to honour him for today. It is fairly abstruse that after the deconstruction of its different features such as class-reductionism through feminism and Eurocentrism through postcolonialism, several Marxist scholars still praise the alleged theoretical power of Historical Materialism. Therefore, an ongoing deconstruction of Historical Materialism integrating insights of non-Marxist critical theory is needed. This is adequately coherent with Marx’s attitude on learning and revising his positions throughout his whole life. Such a Marxian approach would also allow us to engage in a materialist, i.e. non-Eurocentric understanding of the Global South and to draw emancipatory political conclusions that avoid authoritarianism, paternalism, and anti-pluralism. “Hic Rhodus, hic salta!” (Marx 1852: 107).

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