
⁴⁰ Ninth Thesis on Feuerbach

⁴¹ Capital Volume 1, p 171.

⁴² Grundrisse, MECW, 28: 95.

⁴³ Capital, Volume 3, p 959.

Table of Contents

Marx versus Historical Materialism

Smith, Cyril
1999

An article written for the *Historical Materialism* journal, but remained unpublished for two years. From https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/smith-cyril/works/articles/cyril_01.htm.

This title is not merely intended to provoke. It also aims to draw attention to the direct opposition between the body of theory traditionally known as 'Marxism', and the essence of the work of Karl Marx. If you try to discuss what Marx was doing, without placing the struggle for his conception of communism as a 'truly human society' right at the centre of the picture, you surely falsify him. But that is precisely what 'Marxism' does. Elsewhere¹, I have discussed the significance of this contrast for Marx's work as a whole. Here, I concentrate on showing how far the 'Marxist' tradition has misread Marx's conception of history.

I believe it is vitally necessary for this discrepancy to be made explicit. The falsification deeply embedded in traditional accounts of Marx's ideas, particularly of his understanding of historical development, is a major obstacle to the regeneration of revolutionary socialism. 'Marxism' was an attempt to set up a philosophical doctrine, a philosophy of history, which would explain how society made transitions from one stage to another. This misunderstanding obscured what was crucial for everything Marx did: the necessity for social consciousness to break out of its existing, fetishised forms to the level necessary for communism. This was not a matter of replacing one way of thinking with another, for it implied what Marx called 'the alteration of humans on a mass scale'.² Instead of this understanding of the revolutionary transformation of humanity, 'Marxism' set up a system of thinking which assigns to special people – radical philosophers, or social scientists, or economists, or the Marxist Party – the task of 'interpreting the world in various ways' on behalf of the rest of us. In a quite separate operation, their conclusions could then be communicated to the benighted masses.

The basic notion of historical materialism is well known. Plekhanov, one of its chief founders, puts it like this:

(It) is the economic system of any people that determines its social structure, the latter, in its turn, determining its political and religious structures and the like.... (T)he fundamental cause of any social evolution, and consequently of any social advance, being the struggle man wages against Nature for his own existence.... Marx's fundamental idea can be summed up as follows: 1) the production relations determine all other relations existing among people in their social life. 2) the production relations are, in

¹ Marx at the Millennium (Pluto, 1996)

² German Ideology. Marx-Engels Collected Works (MECW), Volume 5: 53.

their turn, determined by the state of the productive forces.³

The basic principle of the materialist explanation of history is that men's thinking is conditioned by their being, or that in the historical process, the course of the development of ideas is determined, in the final analysis, by the course of development of economic relations.⁴

So, whatever the details of the mechanisms proposed by any of its many versions, historical materialism claims to be a way of explaining history. It deals with the causes of social evolution, stressing that history is governed by necessary laws, that are as immutable as laws of nature.

When Plekhanov talked about 'materialism', he wanted to conjure up those eighteenth century French thinkers like Holbach and Helvetius, who argued that human thoughts and actions had their roots in material conditions of the lives of individuals. What they called 'matter', defined as 'what acts in one way or another on our senses', caused us to feel and think, and so to act, in specific ways. Plekhanov and Kautsky thought that Marx's 'materialist conception of history' was an extension of this outlook to the explanation of history. In his eagerness to extirpate all forms of idealism, one of their disciples, VI Lenin, was led to write about 'the analysis of material social relations... that take shape without passing through man's consciousness'.⁵

Historical materialists 'explain' the transition from one stage of social development to another by the conflict between productive forces and social relations. Some practitioners here take productive forces to mean a discrete mixture: means of production plus labour-power.⁶ The question they ignore is why? Here are the two aspects of social life, one the human power to produce, the other the social connections within which this power operates. But why are they separate? Why are they at war with each other?

If you explain something, you have to stand outside it. A 'materialist' explanation involves hypotheses about how some things external to the explainer cause other external things to happen. Here is the basic paradox: when the object to be explained is human history, it includes the wills and consciousnesses of the historical agents, not to mention the will and consciousness of the explainer. In general, they considered historical forces as determining the changes in social forms, as though history had nothing to do with the strivings of living men and women. Many devotees of historical materialism believed strongly in a socialist future and devoted their lives to struggling for it. Did they stand outside the causal process they imagined governed history, somehow immune to its influences?

Some might think that Plekhanov's statement of historical materialism does not give a fair account of the theory. What about other, more sophisticated 'Marxisms'? However, I think that Plekhanov, for all his crudity, actually gets to the heart of the matter. At any rate, he has the not inconsiderable merit of stating clearly just what he means. Since his opinions formed the basis for the outlook of Lenin and his followers, and therefore came to predominate in the Communist International, their influence on all later work is undeniable. When Stalin produced his obscene caricature, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, in 1938, Plekhanov certainly provided him with his model, one well adapted to bureaucratic requirements.

³ Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, Volume II, p 617.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Volume III, p 45.

⁵ Lenin, *What the 'Friends of the People' Are*. *Collected Works*, Volume 1, p 140.

⁶ For example, GA Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence*, p 32.

So, while not everybody using the term 'historical materialism' means exactly the same thing by it, what they all have in common is that they each have in mind a way of explaining history. This also applies to the various schools of 'Western Marxism', who often use the expression, although, they lack Plekhanov's virtue of spelling out just what they think it means. (Karl Marx himself, let us recall, never used the term at all.)

Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness*, the origin of all such thinking, contains his famous lecture 'On the Changing Function of Historical Materialism', delivered in 1919 to his Budapest 'Institute for Research into Historical Materialism'. Early in the lecture, he comes near to giving a kind of definition:

What is historical materialism? It is no doubt a scientific method by which to comprehend the events of the past and to grasp their true nature. In contrast to the historical methods of the bourgeoisie, however, it also permits us to view the present historically and hence scientifically, so that we can penetrate beneath the surface and perceive the profounder historical forces which in reality control events.⁷

But what 'forces' are these? How do they 'control events'? Why are they 'beneath the surface'? Although Lukacs goes on to relate this to his conception of 'proletarian class consciousness', (by which, do not forget, he does not mean the consciousness of the working class), he does not take issue with Plekhanov's ideas. But then, from the time he joined the Communist Party, Lukacs was incapable of disagreeing openly with Lenin and thus, on this topic, with Plekhanov. (Lenin did not feel the same way about Lukacs.)

The story of the Frankfurt School is more complex. Before 1933, when they considered themselves Marxists, they used the term historical materialism fairly frequently, although assuming its meaning to be too well-known to their learned readers to require elaboration. Later, as they moved to the right along their various trajectories, they expressed differences with the theory, but still without explaining exactly what they were disagreeing with.

In 1932, within a few months of the first publication of Marx's Paris Manuscripts, Herbert Marcuse's extraordinary essay on them appeared. It is one of his most brilliant works, and undoubtedly completely original, since nobody had yet commented on the Manuscripts.⁸

But we would search it in vain for a direct reference to the topic announced in its title: 'New Sources of the Foundations of Historical Materialism'. When *Reason and Revolution* came out in 1936, Marcuse had just as little to say about the subject.⁹ Nor is his 1958 *Soviet Marxism: a Critical Analysis*¹⁰ any more helpful on this point. In that book he treats Stalinist 'theory' as a kind of Marxism, although he sometimes hints at its great distance from Marx himself. Marx's own ideas are not discussed in detail.

Finally, let us mention two of the later representatives of the Frankfurt School. Jurgens Habermas, who once wrote extensively on historical materialism, clearly assumed it to be a theoretical explanation of history. Significantly, he recommends

⁷ Georgi Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, (Merlin, 1971) p 224.

⁸ Reprinted in H Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, NLB, 1972.

⁹ *Reason and Revolution*, OUP, 1936.

¹⁰ *Soviet Marxism: a Critical Analysis*. Routledge, 1958.

Stalin's 1938 essay as 'a handbook of historical materialism'.¹¹ Alfred Schmidt's *History and Structure* is an attack upon Althusser's anti-humanist adherence to the Plekhanov story. He declares that his aim is to speak about 'the cognitive primacy of the logical over the historical, without abandoning the materialist basis'¹². I cannot claim to have understood what this means. Maybe it is something like the view I am arguing for in this article, but I am not sure.

Marxism believed that it possessed a theory of history, a set of general explanatory ideas to 'guide revolutionary practice', while the theory's truth remained essentially outside any kind of practice. Of course, Marx himself was sometimes interested in explaining the world, but this was never his primary concern. His famous declaration that 'the point is to change' the world was not a recommendation to alternate a bit of thinking with some 'practice' (although that is the way some Marxists understood it), but an insistence that the objective truth of thinking was essentially bound up with the relations between human beings.¹³ (See Aristotle's use of the word *praxis*.) That is what I mean when I argue, in *Marx at the Millennium*, that Marx did not have a theory.

Certainly, he was keenly interested in theoretical ideas. But when he examined a theory, it was to criticise its categories, and to investigate them as symptoms of social illness. Why does history need explanation? Only because it is not made consciously. Having given up the idea that the course of history is determined by God's will, and accepted that it can only be made by the willed acts of living men and women, we are faced with a problem: why are the outcomes of these acts so different from what any of the actors envisaged? History appears to be something that happens to us, not something we do. Historical theory thinks it can penetrate the mystery of historical development, but it does not explain the source of that mystery. Its own categories are taken uncritically from the existing set-up. Marx's task was not just to solve this riddle 'in theory', but to uncover the reasons for the mystery in which our way of life is shrouded, and to ask: what must we do to live otherwise?

In the light of the outcome of the French Revolution, the questions which Hegel asked also involved the relation between scientific thought and the world it tried to explain. He answered in terms of the cunning irony of History. Spirit, 'substance which is also subject', 'the "I" that is "we", the "we" that is "I",¹⁴ worked out its dialectical logic, 'behind the backs' of individual consciousnesses. Although we have made society ourselves, it appears to us as if it were beyond ordinary thought, under the control of alien powers. Only philosophy can reveal what the human Spirit has achieved, and this only after Spirit's work is done, when it is too late for the philosopher to tell anybody what to do about it.

The old scenario about 'Hegel the idealist' and 'Marx the materialist', in which Hegel was dressed up as Bishop Berkeley, and Marx as Holbach, or even as John Locke, totally mystified the relation between Marx and Hegel. For Marx, it was precisely Hegel's idealism which enabled him to give an account of history, that is, history in its modern, 'alienated' form. This was because Hegel's account was itself 'alienated', set against its object.

¹¹ J Habermas, 'Towards a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism', in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, Heinemann, 1979.

¹² Alfred Schmidt, *History and Structure: an Essay in Hegelian, Marxist and Structuralist Theories of History*, MIT Press, 1981. p109.

¹³ Second Thesis on Feuerbach.

¹⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p 101.

... Hegel... has only found the abstract, logical, speculative expression for the movement of history, which is not yet the real history of man as a given subject, but only the act of creation, the history of the origin of man.¹⁵

Marx agreed with Hegel that that history had indeed operated blindly hitherto, but contended that this was because it was the history of a false, inhuman way of life. A 'truly human' life, communism, now coming into being, will be quite different. Our social relations – and, centrally, our own consciousness of them and of ourselves – will be transparent to us. This was where Marx's critique of Hegel's dialectic began. A theory, even one as powerful as that of Hegel, assumes that its object is inevitably just what it is:

For it is not what is that makes us irascible and resentful, but the fact that it is not as it ought to be. But if we recognise that it is as it must be, i.e. that it is not arbitrariness and chance, then we also recognise that it is as it ought to be.¹⁶

Marx's 'critique' – a word which occurs in the title of almost all of Marx's major works – turns questions of theory against the reality of the life which gives rise to them, demonstrating that this reality is inhuman. For him, the critique of philosophy, like the critique of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest being for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a de-based, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being.¹⁷

Any attempt to describe this contradictory world in a theory is certain to run into difficulties. But these deficiencies may be taken as signals that questions had been raised which no theory is able to answer; to answer them would mean making actual changes in the world, not just in our heads. Then theory's equipment, the 'weapons of criticism', must be exchanged for 'the criticism of weapons'. Let us take two examples, frequently linked by Marx: first religion and then economics.

He did not devote any effort to finding out whether religious beliefs were 'true', but he was very interested in the question: why do people so obviously show a need to believe them? He concluded that society produces religion, 'an inverted world-consciousness', because it is 'an inverted world'. Religion is the heart of the world, so its very existence demonstrates that this is a world with no heart.¹⁸

Marx admired the political economists who strove to explain why economic life works in the way it does. But the very existence of political economy as a science pointed to a mystery at the core of those economic activities in which everybody is engaged, which nobody can control, and which therefore are at the foundation of all social life. Here is where Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' does its work, the counterpart to Hegel's Spirit. However, political economy cannot imagine the possibility of a human way of living. (Religion says it knows another way, but that it is not, unfortunately, to be found in this world.)

This is the starting-point of Marx's critiques of religion, of Utopia, of Hegel's dialectic and of political economy. A critique demands an explicit standpoint, a criterion against which to measure the object under criticism. Marx described his standpoint

¹⁵ Paris Manuscripts. Marx-Engels Selected Works (MECW), 3: 329

¹⁶ Hegel, *The German Constitution*. In *Hegel's Political Writings*, Knox and Pelczinski, p 145.

¹⁷ Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction*. MECW 3: 182.

¹⁸ MECW 3: 175.

as that of 'human society and social humanity'.¹⁹ In this, he differed from theorists, those whose main aim is 'explanation'. They can never evade the task of justifying their premises, and this always leads them into a never-ending spiral of explanations. Above all, they can never explain themselves. Marx starts off with the knowledge that humanity is socially self-creating, while it lives in a fashion which directly denies this. This standpoint does not itself need justification, for it is the condition for discussing anything at all. Marx knew a criterion against which to judge history, which he grasped as the process of struggle through which 'socialised humanity' and its self-knowledge bring themselves into being. That is why he can say that 'communism is the riddle of history solved, and knows itself to be this solution.'²⁰

Someone who attempts to 'explain' history, or, indeed, to do any kind of 'social science', tells us that some human action had 'necessarily' to take the form it did. But we, in turn, have the right to ask the scientist: 'how do you know?' If people's actions are 'determined' by some necessity outside them, are you not yourself, along with your 'objectivity', 'determined' by the same forces? Marxism insisted on calling Marx's conception of history 'materialist'. But Marx's materialism has nothing to do with 'matter' and 'mind', nor is it a 'theory of knowledge'.²¹ Marx knew that the history he investigated was the process of alienated social life, in which consciousness was inhumanly constrained by social being. Knowledge of this process was not something external to it, but itself developed historically in the struggle of living men and women to break out of these constraints. Thus Marx's critical science was a part of the coming-to-be of real, human, self-consciousness, and presaged the coming-to-be of real, human, self-created social life.

Theoretical science, in the form of a particular scientific study, aims to explain some particular aspect of the world. Such a science cannot itself have a scientific explanation, any more than Utopia could explain itself. The great Utopians thought of themselves as scientific students of history. But their standpoint was that of 'the isolated individual', not situated within the actual world, but observing it from the outside. Utopianism told the world what it ought to be like. Thus their 'materialist doctrine must... divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.'²²

Once Marx had discovered the historic role of the proletariat, he could clearly set out his alternative to this attitude:

But in the measure that society moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines, they [the 'socialists'] no longer need to seek science in their minds; they have only to take note of what is happening before their eyes, and become its mouthpiece. So long as they look for science and merely make systems, so long as they are at the beginning of the struggle, they see in poverty nothing but poverty, without seeing in it the revolutionary, subversive side, which will overthrow the old society. From the moment they see this side, science, which is produced by the historical movement and associating itself consciously with it, has ceased to be doctrinaire and has become revolutionary.²³

¹⁹ Tenth Thesis on Feuerbach

²⁰ Paris Manuscripts, MECW, 3: 296-7.

²¹ Neither Hegel nor Marx can have a 'theory of knowledge'. They both know that knowledge is a socio-historical movement. A 'theory' of this movement would have to include a 'theory' of itself, and that is impossible for any 'theory'.

²² Third Thesis on Feuerbach

²³ The Poverty of Philosophy, MECW, 6: 177-8.

Science which takes immediate – inhuman – appearance as its given object cannot envisage a human kind of world. Its task is to show, by means of some mental image or logical model, that this appearance has to be just as it is. Hegel's dialectic aimed to reconstruct within his system the development of the object itself, and of its relations with other objects. This was a huge advance. However, Hegel only saw these relations as ideas. Thus his dialectic, too, was limited, and later came 'to transfigure and glorify what exists (verklären das Bestehende)'.²⁴

Marx's standpoint, 'human society and social humanity', enables him to do something quite different. He traces the inner coherence of his object – money, say, or the State, or the class struggle. Then he can allow its inhuman meaning, its hostility to a truly human life, to shine through the appearance of 'naturalness' and inevitability. Its own development lights up the road which will lead us to its abolition.

Look again at Marx's view of religion. People's belief in another, heavenly, world points to the inverted, inhuman character of this earthly one. That tells us about religion, but we still have to understand theology, the scientific activity of systematising and formalising this belief. Marx, following Feuerbach, grasped this activity as itself a symptom of alienation. Theology, like political economy and historiography, is an upside-down expression of socialised humanity's efforts to become conscious of its own self-creation.

Marx knew that human history was self-creation, 'the creation of man through human labour... the emergence of nature for man'.²⁵ No theory of history whose horizons are limited by bourgeois society can know this. When it tries to describe the events of human self-creation, it remains imprisoned within a mental world which denies that such a process is possible. For communism, says Marx,

the entire movement of history, just as its actual act of genesis... is, therefore, also for its thinking consciousness the comprehended and known process of its becoming.²⁶

Historians are spokespersons for the process in which humanity comes to be, creates itself and becomes conscious of itself, 'within alienation'. But this process can only be grasped in terms of humanity as a united whole, and that unity is beyond their horizons. Humanity in its inhuman form appears as a collection of incommensurable, mutually incomprehensible, mutually hostile fragments. That is why, imprisoned within alienation, historians cannot know what they are doing. The historical movements cannot be seen for what they really are: the life-activities of individual human beings, struggling to free themselves. The 'historical forces', which historical materialism thinks dominate their lives, are seen as subjects, while the individuals whose lives are so determined are treated as mere objects. This inversion characterises the way life is lived and the way it appears, but it is not in accordance with the nature of humanity.

Because he saw humanity as self-producing, Marx knew that productive forces are really the essential capacity of humans to act humanly, that is, to create their own lives. 'Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness.'²⁷ These productive powers grow inside social relations which simultaneously promote and deny human creativity, which pervert and distort it, that is, which

²⁴ Capital Volume 1, Afterword to the Second Edition, p 103.

²⁵ Paris Manuscripts, MECW, 3: 305.

²⁶ Ibid., 297.

²⁷ Ibid., 276.

are alien to humanity. The successive forms of society are given to each generation, but the development of human productive powers make possible the overthrow of all such forms.

Thus the key conflict is between productive powers, which are potentially free, and social relations which appear in the form of alien, oppressive forces. In a human society, productive forces and social relations would be 'two different aspects of the development of the social individual'.²⁸ Today, however, the battle between them permeates every phase of human life. It secretes the poison which runs through the heart of every individual. Communism is the task of transcending this conflict, moving towards a society in which individuals will be able consciously to make their own social relations, so that 'the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association'.²⁹

There has been considerable controversy among Marxists about the stages through which history has passed. A dogmatic historical materialism fixes an agenda for the movement from slavery, to feudalism, to capitalism, and – only after the completion of this list – to socialism. Those who help to move the list along, are labelled 'progressive', while those who call for socialism 'before its time', like those classes or nations whose existence does not fit into the schedule, have to be crushed. Many people have pointed out that Marx himself has no such 'unilinear' notion. But what is not emphasised sufficiently is that, in that famous passage from the 1859 Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy*, which Marx described as the 'guideline' [Leitfaden] for his study of political economy, he was discussing human 'pre-history', history in its inhuman shape.

The Communist Manifesto famously declared that 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'. But Marx never forgot that class antagonism is itself one of the manifestations of alienation:

Personal interests always develop, against the will of the individuals, into class interests, into common interests which acquire independent existence in relation to the individual persons.³⁰

Every analogy between the proletariat and earlier classes is potentially misleading. The proletariat is unique among classes, in that its historic role is to do away with itself. It is 'a class... which has no longer any particular class interest to assert against a ruling class'.³¹ It is the 'universal class', precisely because it is 'the complete loss of man, and hence can win itself only through the complete rewinning of man'.³² In the course of this upheaval, it could and must 'succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew'.³³ It challenges the 'laws of history' by forming itself into the historical subject.

Marx's famous 'base and superstructure' metaphor was distorted by historical materialism into a blind causal mechanism. However, on the single occasion when Marx used it, he referred solely to that 'prehistory', where economic activity dominated by self-interest fragments communal life. In 'civil society', 'the field of con-

²⁸ Grundrisse, MECW, 29: 92.

²⁹ German Ideology, MECW, 5: 78.

³⁰ Ibid, 245.

³¹ Ibid., 77.

³² Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction. MECW, 3: 186.

³³ German Ideology, MECW, 5: 53.

flict... between private interests and particular concerns of the community³⁴, community is shattered. On the one hand, economic activities are perverted, from expressions of human creativity into forms of oppression and exploitation. Only illusory forms of life falsely purport to represent the community. So, for instance, Marx claims that the State is 'the illusory community'.³⁵ Law and politics, and institutions and ideological forms corresponding to them – religion, art and philosophy – exist as a 'superstructure' upon a fragmented economic basis.

Marx said that 'consciousness is explained by the contradictions of material life', that it was 'determined' by 'social being', and that 'the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life'. Historical materialism thought that these phrases described immutable laws of human development. Actually, of course, these were features of our inhuman life, its developing essence. While state, law, family, religion and all other antagonistic forms of life are our own work, these forms of our own social relations confront us as foreign powers, not merely 'independent of the will' of individuals, but dominating them as enemies.

All history is the outcome of conscious human action. But when human beings live inhumanly, their own social development appears as something outside their control. 'The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare [Alp] on the brain of the living.'³⁶ Alienated history, Hegel's 'slaughter-bench of nations'³⁷, can only appear as a nightmare.

Only if social relations were consciously made, opening up the space in which individual human creative potentialities can develop, would they be transparent to us. In such a 'true community', there would be no 'superstructure', and therefore no 'basis'. Humans freely associating could freely create their own social and individual lives. Living in such a world, individuals could begin to grasp that history was their own process of origin, just as they would see nature as 'their own, inorganic, body'.³⁸

History has never been made by puppets controlled by 'laws'. Living men and women have always struggled to tackle the problems of their time. But, constrained by social forms which were both their own handiwork and alien to them, they were unable to see how these problems could be overcome. This is how Marx describes the resulting appearance of historical necessity:

This process of inversion is merely an historical necessity, merely a necessity for the development of the productive forces from a definite historical point of departure, or basis. In no way is it an absolute necessity of production; it is rather a transitory (*verschwindene*) one, and the result and (immanent) aim of this process is to transcend this basis itself and this form of the process.³⁹

When society no longer appears as an alien 'second nature', whose laws seem to be immutable, we shall get to grips with the problems of living as part of 'first nature', that is, of nature. Natural necessity would remain, of course, to be studied by natural science, to be the collaborator with technology in satisfying human needs. But historical necessity would gradually be overcome and transformed. If this is

³⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, para. 289, Z.

³⁵ *German Ideology*. MECW, 5: 46.

³⁶ *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, MECW, 11:103

³⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of World History*, Introduction.

³⁸ *Paris Manuscripts*. MECW 3: 275-6.

³⁹ *Grundrisse*, MECW, 29: 210.

'materialism', it is certainly not the 'old materialism', whose standpoint was that of 'single individuals and of "civil society"'.⁴⁰

In the bourgeois epoch, the possibility arose of creating a new way of living. Within the antagonistic forms of the alienated world, 'the productive forces developing within bourgeois society' have already created 'the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism', for a world of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour-force.⁴¹

In such a truly human world, a world without 'superstructure', without the distortions resulting from the clash between social relations and human forces of production, without the opposition of means of production to labour power, human life would be self-consciously self-created. We could increasingly learn how to talk over the conflicts which have always arisen as part of social life, and collectively make possible the free development of individuality. This movement towards freedom would mean that our social self-consciousness could increasingly 'determine' our 'social being'. Historical materialism only describes the movement of alienated, life, but Marx views the whole of history as a process of overcoming alienation, and that, for him, is the point of studying it.

Relationships of personal dependence (which originally arise quite spontaneously) are the first forms of society... Personal independence based upon dependence mediated by things is the second great form, and only in it is a system of general social exchange of matter, a system of universal relations, universal requirements and universal capacities formed. Free individuality, based on the universal development of the individuals and the subordination of their communal, social productivity, which is the social possession, is the third stage.⁴²

Historical materialism transformed that page from the 1859 Preface into a 'theory of history', while in fact it refers only the 'second stage' of Marx's scheme. For him, the real importance of studying this stage of alienation, the prehistory of humanity, was to help us understand how it had prepared the ground for that 'third stage', the stage of human freedom, the beginning of our real conscious history.

Herein lies the direct opposition of Marx to historical materialism. The theorists of Marxism wanted to explain the past or predict the future. But Marx was not chiefly interested in either of these. Instead, he studied history, as he studied everything else, to illuminate the struggle between a way of life which required explanation and one which would be 'worthy of our human nature'.⁴³