

Theses on Historical Materialism

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The following set of theses attempts to provide a coherent and correct view of historical materialism, in opposition to the economist interpretation which is an integral component of Stalinism. The object here is just to lay out the ideas for discussion, rather than to demonstrate their validity.

1. Society develops through a succession of lengthy, relatively stable stages, which we characterize by their "mode of production". Throughout such a "stage", it is the economic base (forces of production, relations of production) which "determines" the superstructure of society (cultural, political, ideological, and philosophical aspects). This is of course the materialist view of history, although it does not imply that elements of the superstructure do not react back on the economic base to effect significant modifications of this base. However, on the whole the economic base remains dominant, and undergoes only what can be viewed as being quantitative changes (i.e., the nature of the economic base, as defined by the relations of production, remains qualitatively the same, and it is meaningful to characterize the entire stage by the dominance of a particular mode of production). During these relatively stable stages, society is propelled forward mainly by the relatively slow, quantitative development of the forces of production, by the increasingly effective "appropriation of nature" to satisfy humanity's material needs.

2. There is a "Main Track" of the development of human society, which consists of a succession of exploitative stages, or modes of production. By "exploitative" we mean that a particular non-producing social class controls the means of production and accordingly appropriates for its personal use a substantial portion of the product of the masses of laborers. A typical succession of stages found in the Main Track is barbarism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and (tentatively) "state collectivism". The succession of stages usually corresponds to successive qualitative developments of the productive forces, for reasons which we shall see below, but this correspondence is not unique, as Marx has pointed out¹. Furthermore, the particular sequence of stages is not necessarily the same for every society. Thus it is not true, as Stalin later asserted, that to each level of development of the productive forces there corresponds a particular mode of production. Rather, the succession of stages is determined by class struggle, as outlined in the next point.

3. The transition between stages is effected by a political revolution, in which a particular class takes political control of society and transforms the relations of production in order to serve its own needs. In order for such a transition to take place, certain objective conditions must exist: the new dominant class must already exist, at least in embryonic form; the new relations of production to be imposed must actually be capable of organizing production in such a way as to satisfy the material needs of society (thus, a particular mode of production does presuppose a certain minimal level of development of the productive forces); and society must be in a state of crisis so profound that the old dominant class is no longer able to govern effectively. But these objective conditions, while necessary, are not sufficient for the triumph of the revolution and the ascendancy of a new social class: whether or not the revolution does succeed is also dependent upon contradictions at all levels of society, as manifested in class struggle, and this class struggle indeed determines which of the contending classes will be dominant in the new society, i.e. what the new mode of production will be.

4. Once the political revolution has succeeded and the relations of production have been transformed, there will (usually) be a qualitative advance in the level of productive forces, for (usually) the new dominant class has arisen in the old society through the increasingly high level of development of the productive forces, and the production relations which it imposes will be qualitatively better suited to the further development of the productive forces². In this sense we can say that it is the fundamental contradiction of the economic base (between the forces of production and the relations of production) which "causes" the qualitative development of human society, through successive modes of production. But in making this general statement we must bear in mind that which is practically of far greater importance: the particular qualitative development of a society is determined by the particularities of the class struggle in the current conjuncture, and the period of transition between modes of production is one of the dominance of the superstructure (specifically, the political aspect) over the economic base. Thus, focussing on the qualitative development of society rather than upon its quantitative development during relatively stable stages (modes of production), we see that it is the class struggle rather than the development of the forces of production which is the "motor force of history".

5. The "Main Track" is a succession of exploitative stages of society, but it is not the only possibility. Also possible is another mode of production, "communism", in which the producers themselves directly control the process of production and appropriate for their own use the entire product of their labor. This emancipation of labor can only be achieved by the producers themselves, and it is possible only with a level of productive forces so high that there are sufficient material goods for everyone and that the labor process is necessarily collectivized. Thus, it is only when society has advanced to capitalism that getting off the "Main Track" becomes feasible (unless advanced technology is imported), and the higher the development of the productive forces, the easier will be the transition to communism, once the political domination of the exploiting class has been broken.

6. The transition period from the Main Track to communism is called "socialism". Like all other transition periods between modes of production, this period is characterized by the political dominance of the new ruling class ("dictatorship of the proletariat"); concretely, this domination is carried out by the communist party (the "vanguard of the proletariat"), whose key task² is to increasingly transform the relations of production (as well as the various elements of the superstructure) so that it is the masses themselves (rather than the communist party, acting in their interests) who come to totally control society and achieve communism. Like all transition periods, socialism is a period of intense class struggle, with other classes vying (consciously or unconsciously) with the proletariat to restore society to the Main Track, either to the old exploitative mode of production or to a new one. The outcome of this terrible battle will be decided only by class struggle, and the leadership which the communist party gives to the proletariat in their struggle for communism is absolutely vital: without the active intervention in the class struggle by a communist party which gives political leadership to the proletariat on the basis of its correct theoretical understanding of the development of human society (historical and dialectical materialism), the struggles of the proletariat will be led astray and smashed.

7. We have tentatively identified a stage in the Main Track which immediately succeeds capitalism as "state collectivism", a name which has been given³ to Sweezy's "third form"⁴. It is our expectation that analysis of Soviet society, following Bettelheim's work, will identify the defining characteristics of such a new mode of production. However, it is not essential to our understanding of historical materialism that Soviet society be considered to have regained the Main Track (either capitalism or a new exploitative mode of production); although we strongly doubt it, the Soviet Union could well still be socialist, without a dominant mode of production and with the question of which class shall rule still unresolved. Our point regarding possible extension of the Main Track beyond capitalism is that there is always, under socialism, the possibility of return to the Main Track, that the question of which class shall rule is not resolved by the seizure of political power by the working class, but rather by class struggle extending throughout the period of socialism, until a relatively stable mode of production (communism, capitalism, or a new exploitative mode) has achieved hegemony. Communism is not the necessary successor to capitalism, and development of the forces of production, while highly important, is not the key task of the communist party under socialism. Rather, the key task under socialism, the fulfillment of which is of overriding importance to the achievement of communism, is the transformation of the relations of production - the systematic replacement of capitalist relations with communist relations - and the attendant mobilization of the masses of producers to increasingly take direct control of all aspects of society.

8. Our differences with Stalinism over the nature of historical materialism are fundamental. From their economist perspective, the Stalinists do not recognize the primacy (or even the existence) of class struggle throughout the period of socialism; rather, for them, "building communism" is mainly a matter of developing the productive forces, once the proletariat's party has seized political power. Rather than viewing socialism as a period of intense class struggle between two (or more) conflicting sets of relations of production, the Stalinists view socialism as a relatively stable "mode of production" winging its way to communism. With such a misunderstanding of the realities of class struggle, the Stalinists have no theoretical defense against the restoration of exploitative society in a new form, and can only react against the obvious throwbacks to capitalism while merrily helping to rejoin the Main Track. Economists such as the Stalinists and Trotskyists, while personally dedicated to the establishment of a classless society, can never lead the proletariat to communism; rather, they can only help to bring about a new exploitative society. This is why the main task before the communist movement in the United States is theoretical: the reconstruction of Marxism-Leninism from the degeneration which it has undergone under the domination of Stalinism.

Footnotes

1. See pp. 548-550 of Volume II of Charles Bettelheim's Class Struggles in the U.S.S.R. (Second Period: 1923-1930).
2. For Marx's views on the key role played by the relations of production (rather than by the forces of production) in transforming society, see pp. 513-517 of Volume II of Bettelheim's Class Struggles in the U.S.S.R.
3. Michel Beaud, Bertrand Bellon, and Patrick Francois, Lire le Capitalisme (Paris: Anthropos, 1976). See also "Capitalism, State Collectivism, and Socialism", by Samir Amin (Monthly Review, June 1977, 25-41).
4. Paul M. Sweezy, "A Crisis in Marxian Theory", Monthly Review, June 1979, pp. 20-24.