Marxism

Lecture 2 – History
John Filling
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Overview

1. Precursors
2. The 1859 Preface
3. Modes, forces, and relations of production
4. Cohen’s ‘functionalist’ interpretation
5. Questions for Cohen
6. Looking ahead
‘In every enquiry concerning the operations of men when united together in society, the first object of attention should be their mode of subsistence. Accordingly as that varies, their laws and policy must be different.’

– William Robertson, *History of America*
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The materialist conception of history

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Forces of production

Relations of production

Legal and political superstructure

Social consciousness

DEVELOPMENT
Legal and political superstructure

Social consciousness

Relations of production

Forces of production

DEVELOPMENT

FETTERING LEADS TO Revolution
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– Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto
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(1) **The Development Thesis**: the productive forces tend to develop throughout history.

(2) **The Primacy Thesis**: the level of development of the productive forces explains the nature of its productive relations.

(3) The productive relations of a society explain the nature of its superstructure.

(4) The productive relations of a society are responsible for the development of its productive forces.

(5) The superstructure of a society is responsible for the stability of its productive relations.

Reverse causation?

Forces and Relations
1. Development of F explains nature of R
2. Nature of R is responsible for development of F

Base and Superstructure
3. B explains nature of S
4. S is responsible for stability of B

➤ Problem: how can X explain Y, if Y is responsible for X?
Functional Explanation

Functional facts

- Y is functional for X
  - Relations responsible for development of Forces
  - Birds’ hollow bones facilitate flight

Functional explanations

- Y occurs because it is functional for X
  - Relations obtain because they tend to develop Forces
  - Birds have hollow bones because they facilitate flight

Problem: ‘microfoundations’ (Roemer), ‘mechanisms’ (Elster), ‘elaborations’ (Cohen)
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Questions

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2. **Empirical**: do the forces tend to develop? (Joshua Cohen)

3. **Determinism**: if all (epochal historical) events are determined, whither individual agency? (Isaiah Berlin)

4. **Sociological**: what about class struggle? (Andrew Levine & Erik Olin Wright)

5. **Analytical**: can the base be distinguished from the superstructure? (Steven Lukes), or the forces from the relations? (Charles W. Mills)
Determinism

Determinism

- ‘the natural laws of capitalist production ... winning their way through and working themselves out with iron necessity.’
  

Agency

- ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they choose. They do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly given, encountered and transmitted from the past.’

  – Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*
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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Chapters in <em>Capital, vol. 1</em></th>
<th>Pages (in Penguin edn.)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 2: History</td>
<td>Part 8 (chs. 26-33)</td>
<td>873-943 (= 70pp.)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Week 3: Ideology</strong></td>
<td>Chs. 1-2</td>
<td><strong>125-188 (= 63pp.)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 4: Alienation</td>
<td>Chs. 2-7</td>
<td>188-307 (= 119pp.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 5: Exploitation</td>
<td>Chs. 8-12</td>
<td>307-429 (= 122pp.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 6: Domination</td>
<td>Chs. 13-15</td>
<td>429-643 (= 214pp.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 7: Liberalism</td>
<td>Chs. 16-24</td>
<td>643-762 (= 119pp.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 8: Feminism</td>
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References

Summing-up

Key categories
- Forces, relations, modes of production

Key claims
- Development Thesis + Primacy Thesis
- Functional Explanation
- Capitalism as liberating (albeit imperfectly)

Key questions
- Interpretative and empirical accuracy
- Whither capitalism?