We can first summarise Marx’s theory of historical materialism as a theory connecting the economic base of a society, i.e., their current mode of production, with the ideological, political and legal superstructure. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859)*, Marx says:

> [“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”](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm).

Critically, while the theory puts forward the economic base as the dominant force in the relationship, historical materialism also concedes that the political and legal superstructure can also influence *and modify* the economic base. This idea is supported by Engels in his [letter to Conrad Schmidt (1890)](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_10_27.htm), where he combats the idea that “political power is economically impotent”. Why else – asks he – would “[they] be fight[ing] for the political dictatorship of the proletariat”?

Now I will try to capture where this theory fails.

First, the elephant in the room: if it is possible for both the economic base and ideological superstructure to shape one another, then any convincing evidence which seems to contradict the idea that the economic base is the dominant in the relationship can be classified as a common exception to the rule. Consequently, we’ll look at an empirical argument contradicting a specific historical materialist prediction laid out by Marx and Engels.

Historical materialism is contradicted most prominently, in my opinion, by statements made by Marx and Engels on chattel slavery in the Southern United States. A historical materialist analysis will posit that the unprofitability of slavery was the first domino to fall in the USA’s anti-slavery mentality:

> [“[A]s soon as the free labour of other countries provides industry with its cotton supplies in sufficient quantity and more cheaply than the slave labour of the United States, American slavery will have been broken […] and the slaves will be emancipated because as slaves they will have become unusable.”](https://www.hekmatist.com/Marx%20Engles/Marx%20&%20Engels%20Collected%20Works%20Volume%2010_%20M%20-%20Karl%20Marx.pdf) (MECW 10, p. 502)

And, following from historical materialist theory, only after “slaves become unusable” economically, will the political and legal superstructure catch-up.

So, when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, was it the result of the decay of the economic viability of chattel slavery, as Marx and Engels predicted? Looking even further back, was the banning of slave imports to the USA in 1807 a result of the unprofitability of the international slave trade?

To answer both questions, I would say no. First, let’s consider the economic data. Among economists, 72% agree that slavery in the South was generally more efficient than agricultural free labour in the North; 98% disagree that slavery was on its economic deathbed on the eve of the civil war [(Waples, 1995)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2123771). Among historians these numbers change to 65% and 95%, respectively – they did not differ (statistically) significantly from economists.

Moving back in time to examine the ban of slave imports in 1807, why did the Atlantic slave trade and slave plantations proliferate for many years after the ban? In a similar vein, why does [chattel slavery persist today](https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/descent-based-slavery/)? The answer is the same reason that bans and [anti-slaving squadrons of ships](https://archives.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/exhibitions/museums/chasing.html) were necessary in the first place – it is, and always has been, profitable to enslave people. The radical change in the mode of production was, I’d argue, driven instead mainly by ideological (be that cultural, political, or legal) factors, which prevailed *in spite of* economic incentives to maintain slavery. One example of this pre-existing ideological disposition includes Jefferson’s address calling the slave trade “those violations of human rights which have long been so continued on the unoffending inhabitants of Africa”.

To reiterate and summarise: Marxist historiography, i.e., historical materialism, *directly argues* that the emancipation of slaves occurs *because* slaves become economically unviable. The economic-historical record seems to contradict this position – both economists and historians agree that slavery was more efficient than free labour, and – economically speaking – not in danger of systemic unprofitability. Instead, it was political movements based principally on ideas of universal human rights that brought about emancipation.

For further reading and a more theoretical criticism of historical materialism, check out *Marxian Utopia?* by Nevan Sesardić (specifically the section on historical materialism, of course).