

KARL MARX

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MATERIALISM, AGENCY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

1 Is Marx a determinist?

Many writers say historical materialism holds that the thoughts and actions of individual human beings are causally determined by economic factors. They take historical materialism to be a species of causal determinism, and incompatible with libertarianism, the view which affirms that human choices are free and denies that they are determined. I know of no text where Marx explicitly addresses the issue of free will and determinism, and doubt that he has any firm opinion on this issue. The belief that historical materialism involves a species of causal determinism about human actions probably derives from the erroneous idea that the 'determination' of production relations by productive powers and of the social superstructure by its economic basis are cases of efficient causes determining effects. Now that we have (I hope) disposed of this idea, we can take a new look at the textual evidence which might lead us to think that historical materialism is committed to causal determinism.

Marx says that economic relations are 'independent of the will' of those who enter into them, and he often asserts or implies that people are controlled or tyrannized by 'alien' economic conditions. But no philosophical determinism is implied in these claims. Marx holds that economic circumstances dominate people by placing obstacles in the way of their achieving a fulfilling way of life and by subjecting them to illusions which prevent their setting meaningful goals for themselves. Even extreme libertarians admit that people are sometimes prevented by external obstacles from doing what they want to, and that ignorance or error sometimes stands in the way of their formulating rational aims. One of Marx's primary objectives is to free people as much as possible from the social relations and ideological illusions which dominate and imprison them. If Marx's belief that people in

class society are so dominated is a species of determinism, then it is not the causal determinism of a necessary law of nature, but a determinism that is historically contingent, and it is one of Marx's chief practical aims that it should cease to operate.

Marx is convinced that a violent class war between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is virtually inevitable, because the bourgeoisie is incapable of accepting the truth that capitalism is an obsolete system. But he is not convinced of this because he believes that the consciousness of each individual bourgeois is determined robot-like by economic facts. Marx explicitly asserts that 'as earlier a part of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a part of the bourgeoisie is going over to the proletariat, namely the part of the bourgeois ideologues which has worked itself up to a theoretical understanding of the whole historical movement.'¹ If Marx is persuaded that this part of the bourgeoisie must remain a minority, that is because he respects the powerful social influence of bourgeois ideologies, which even the most evident scientific knowledge cannot wholly overcome before the practical abolition of the social conditions on which they rest. Once again, it is Marx's aim to counteract this influence as far as he can.

The Marxian critique of ideology, and Marxian historical materialism more generally, may be viewed as themselves aiming at a certain kind of liberation. People may be considered unfree as long as they are doing something without knowing that they are doing it, especially when, if they knew they were doing it, they would choose to stop doing it. In Marx's view, individuals whose social activity is performed by them under the influence of class ideology are unfree in just this way. One task of the Marxian theory of history is to provide them with a correct theoretical interpretation of their own actions, and of the social and historical meaning of those actions, which prevailing class ideologies disguise, mystify or falsify. This reinterpretation of their actions will, in Marx's view can (and rationally should) lead them in many cases to act differently. For instance, if those who think they are defending human rights see themselves more correctly as defending class oppression, or those who think they are following God's will see themselves more correctly as making themselves into willing victims of exploitation, then they will change their actions, so that what they do can be done self-transparently with a correct theoretical understanding of what they are doing, and with a rational will to do it. The freedom they gain in this way is not necessarily the freedom of being able to do what you intend; but it could be more accurately

described as the freedom of being able to intend what you do. But this freedom must be reckoned among the capacities that fall under freedom of will for any rational, self-reflective social and historical agent.

Some of Engels' remarks do appear to endorse the thesis that the volitions of individuals are causally determined by economic circumstances. 'Individual wills', he says, 'will as they are driven to by their corporeal constitution and by external, in the last instance economic circumstances (either their own personal circumstances or general social ones).'² Does Engels really believe that individuals are always caused ('driven') to will as they do by economic circumstances? Not consistently, anyway. For he also believes, as we saw earlier, that individual wills are determined by 'passion or deliberation', and these in turn are moved directly not by economic factors but 'levers of various kinds' including 'purely individual crotchets'. Thus perhaps in the above remark Engels means to say only that a satisfactory explanation of the historical efficacy of an individual's action must always invoke 'external and in the last instance economic circumstances', and does not mean that economic circumstances always 'drive' individuals to perform the particular actions they do.

Whatever Engels may believe, it is only the latter conclusion which is implied in historical materialist explanations. Historical materialism seeks to explain political events or socially prevalent ideologies teleologically by showing how they contribute to basic social or historical tendencies. Explanations of this sort are in general not deterministic. They do not imply that the tendency in question had to be manifested in just that way, or that it required the contribution of that particular *explanandum* in order to exist at all. In fact, a 'basic historical tendency' which required (that is, depended on) certain particular events or the performance of certain actions by particular individuals would *eo ipso* be too flimsy and brittle to deserve the name. A materialist explanation of the French Revolution, for example, might show that the events of 1789 and the actions of such men as Mirabeau and Sièyes served to bring about political changes required by the economic conditions of France and the state of the class struggle. But the explanation need not show that economic conditions required these changes to take place at just that time or in just that manner, and almost certainly could not show that they had to be effected by just those individuals. To say that the Revolution came about on account of a basic historical tendency is precisely *not* to say that it had to happen in just the particular way it did.

A materialist theory may attempt historical explanations of greater

or less detail. But however detailed they may be, they are concerned with the thoughts and actions of particular individuals only insofar as these individuals happen to be especially influential or to represent some important social type. Such a theory might (for instance) try to show how Napoleon's political objectives suited the balance of class power in France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and in this way to explain both why France was likely to have a ruler with those objectives and why a skillful and ambitious leader with those objectives was politically successful. But historical materialism offers no explanation for the fact that this individual, Napoleon Bonaparte, had the particular desires and objectives he did. Materialist explanations are perfectly consistent with the supposition that Napoleon's aims were at the mercy of his causally undetermined choices. Again, historical materialism offers no explanation for the fact that a singular personality such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau espoused petty bourgeois republicanism rather than divine right monarchy, or indeed for the fact that Rousseau chose to write about politics at all, instead of spending his whole life copying music or being kept by neurotic gentlewomen. What historical materialism might try to explain is why some individual (no matter who) invented a political philosophy like Rousseau's, and why this philosophy was prominent or influential. (It might do this, for instance, by showing how this philosophy served as a vehicle for the development of bourgeois and petty bourgeois class consciousness.) This means that a materialist account might do much towards explaining the currency of Rousseau's philosophy in various bowdlerized forms but have little or nothing to say about Rousseau's actual thought insofar as it has been widely misinterpreted and has had little or no social impact. Even supposing that Rousseau was causally determined to think and write as he did (whether by economic conditions or by anything else) this fact could not play a significant role in the kind of explanation historical materialism might give of his ideas or actions.

One reason which is sometimes given for saying that Marx is a causal determinist is that he believes certain historical developments are *inevitable*. But it is not immediately evident why this belief should commit him to causal determinism. Perhaps the most reasonable way of making the connection is this: Marx bases his belief in historical inevitability on the existence and predominance of certain social tendencies. It is reasonable to think (even if it is not wholly evident) that these tendencies in Marx's view must be causally explainable in terms of the influence of economic conditions on individual human beings.

Hence we may conclude that Marx regards the actions of individuals as causally determined by economic conditions.

This is a bad argument. There might very well be causally sufficient conditions for a certain historical tendency, even for a certain inevitable result, even if no individual's behavior is causally determined. Libertarians usually admit (what is obvious) that we often can accurately predict what people will do. One standard account they give of this ability says that people's actions are influenced or inclined to a certain course of action by motives or circumstances, without being determined to choose that course or prevented from choosing another. By knowing which influences or inclinations are operating on a person, we can often guess (with a high degree of probability) what the person will choose to do, even though these choices are free and not causally determined.

If we are libertarians who accept some such account as this, then we have all the philosophical beliefs anyone needs not only to provide causal accounts of the tendencies postulated by historical materialism, but even to convince ourselves that some courses of events are historically inevitable. For suppose we know (1) that a large number of individuals will be strongly inclined to perform actions of a certain sort; (2) that nothing will prevent them from doing so; and (3) that a certain number of these actions will be causally sufficient to produce a certain result. Then we know enough to provide a causal explanation for the fact that there is a tendency for this result to be produced, and even enough to justify the belief that this result is inevitable. Yet we remain libertarians in good standing all the while.

Consider the following example. The manager of a theater knows that certain theater seats will tend to be sat in more often than others, because not all performances play to a full house, and some seats provide a better view of the stage than others. She also knows that when a given seat has been used a certain number of times, its upholstery will become worn and will need repair. From this she infers that certain identifiable seats will *inevitably* need repair sooner than others. In order to reason in this way, the manager surely does not need to be a determinist about human actions. No sensible person could accuse her of denying that theater-goers are free to choose which seats they sit in.

The reasoning behind Marx's belief in the historical inevitability of the rise and fall of capitalism in Western Europe is not so very different from that used by the theater manager. Suppose a historian believes that people are generally inclined to expand their productive

powers and adjust their social relations to accommodate the exercise of these powers. For this reason, the historian thinks there is a general tendency for a given set of production relations to be adopted when they are sufficiently conducive to the development of productive powers and when the already existing relations have ceased to be conducive to this development. Now suppose our historian also believes that during the early part of their history capitalist relations were highly conducive to productive development as compared with feudal or petty industrial ones, but more recently they have become fetters on development in ways that socialist relations would not be. The historian therefore infers that the general inclination of people toward social relations which favor productive development made it inevitable that capitalism should triumph over feudalism and petty industry, and will make socialism's triumph over capitalism equally inevitable.

This is an oversimplified but basically correct account of Marx's reasoning. But it is reasoning which does not differ in any philosophically interesting respect from the reasoning of our theater manager, and it is reasoning in which most libertarians could comfortably engage. I conclude that there is nothing in Marx's belief in historical inevitability which prevents him from being a libertarian. If some people are disposed to view Marx's belief in the historical inevitability of capitalism's rise and fall as committing him to controversial metaphysical doctrines, I think this is only because they are dazzled by the ambitious scope (and possible disturbing implications) of Marx's predictions. I doubt that the same people would see any metaphysical difficulties in similar (but more socially innocuous and empirically modest) predictions like the theater manager's prediction that certain seats will inevitably need reupholstery sooner than others.

There is nothing in Marx's historical materialism, I submit, which requires him to hold that human thoughts and actions are causally determined. It is a separate question whether he actually is a determinist, a question which I doubt we can answer with any degree of certainty. Marx seems to endorse the 'materialistic' thesis of Condillac and Helvetius that 'men are made by circumstances', and this thesis is presumably intended to assert some form of causal determinism about human character and action.³ But Marx also insists that previous materialism has erred by overlooking the 'active side', ignoring the complementary truth that 'men change their circumstances'.⁴ It is not clear whether or how this revision is supposed to bear on the determinist aspect of the earlier materialists' views. In any case, it

seems quite likely that if Marx is a determinist he is also a compatibilist, that is, he believes that causal determinism with regard to human actions does not imply that people are unable to choose freely. When Engels endorses the Hegelian doctrine that 'freedom is necessity comprehended', he probably intends (among other things) to subscribe to some form of compatibilism.⁵ Frankly, I doubt Marx and Engels ever gave much thought to the metaphysical issue of free will and determinism. Why should they? Nothing in their theory of history turns on this issue.

There is another charge sometimes brought against Marx which really has nothing to do with free will and determinism, but tends to be closely associated with the free will issue in people's minds and probably contributes to the idea that Marx holds some scandalous doctrine in this area. This is the charge that historical materialism fails to comprehend individuals in their unique individuality, that Marx 'minimizes the individual and his significance' in history, and 'drowns the individual in the class and the movement of history'.⁶ There is quite a bit of truth in these claims, though not, I think, in the idea that they locate a defect in historical materialism. Materialist explanations are teleological explanations. Teleological explanations generally focus attention on the contribution made by elements of an organized system to its global tendencies. Accordingly, they tend to ignore the properties of these elements which are not relevant to their function in the system. Historical materialism proposes a teleological theory about the careers of social forms, political movements and prevalent or influential ideas. Its aims and methods require historical materialism to view individuals from the perspective of their relation to these social forms, and thus deliberately to ignore their 'unique individuality'. Historical materialism is not (and was never meant to be) a good guide to the writing of personal biography or the history of some individual's inner spiritual development.

2 Three senses of 'ideology'

'Ideology', like 'alienation', has become one of the most fashionable concepts in Marxian thinking, despite (or rather perhaps because of) the fact that Marx is conspicuously unclear as to what he means by 'ideology' and what he does say is beset with dangers of confusion and inconsistency. I think we can discern three basic uses of 'ideology' and its cognates in the writings of Marx and Engels, and we can acquire a basic grasp of what Marx thought about ideology if we