

KARL MARX

2nd Edition

Allen W. Wood

MATERIALIST EXPLANATIONS

1 Historical materialism as an empirical hypothesis

Marx's materialist conception of history identifies the dominant factors in explaining social structures and their historical changes, and sketches a scenario of historical change based on the dominance of these factors. Marx postulates certain basic tendencies in human social behavior: the tendency of society's productive powers to increase; the tendency of social relations to adjust themselves to the efficient employment of these powers, and to change in response to changes in them; the tendency of social groups with shared economic interests to organize into social movements struggling to establish and defend the set of social relations most favorable to the group. Marx believes these tendencies are sufficiently potent and persistent to give human history a certain basic intelligibility, the broadest and deepest sort of intelligibility it is possible to give it.

Marx's postulates cohere with two of his other beliefs: that human fulfillment consists in developing and exercising people's powers of social production; and that the human race eventually tends to do (if often in a bumbling and unconscious way) what its deepest and most long-term interests demand. Marx's postulates taken together suggest a determinate pattern in history. There is some reason to see how far this pattern can be discerned in the empirical facts, and how far it might be used to explain these facts. The scientific value of a hypothesis often turns less on how true it eventually proves to be than on the discoveries which we can make in the course of testing it. From this standpoint, historical materialism might deservedly revolutionize and advance the study of history even if it turns out to be largely false.

Marx, of course, is firmly persuaded that historical materialism is true. But both Marx and Engels nevertheless insist that historical materialism is not a dogma to be defended at all cost, but a 'guiding

thread' for empirical research, a 'proposal for study' in a field which is 'still in its swaddling clothes'. They sternly castigate would-be 'Marxists' who 'make "historical materialism" into a mere phrase' by using it 'as a pretext for *not* studying history'.¹ It may be objected that Marx's anxiety to vindicate the materialist hypothesis sometimes leads him to do violence to the facts, to exaggerate some, ignore others, and generally to oversimplify his historical material to fit his preconceived theory. But insofar as Marx is guilty of such things, he stands condemned by his own conception of the role historical materialism ought to play in the study of history. Objections of this kind are typically leveled against any study of history that seeks deeper intelligibility in it than what the objector has a taste for. The cool-headed skepticism to which such objections appeal might as easily be applied against the objections themselves on a methodological level, to the extent that they rest on unargued prejudices about whether history makes any sense at all.

The postulates of Marx's historical materialism are, I think, plausible: but not self-evident. (If they were, it is unlikely that they could provide any but trivial explanations of social facts and historical changes.) Apart from detailed empirical investigation, we cannot hope to know the extent to which the efficient employment of this or that society's productive powers places significant constraints on its work relations and ownership relations. Nor can we know how far the social divisions engendered by these relations play a role in shaping its politics, art, religion or morality. Even if the tendencies historical materialism postulates are all real and effective, there is no guarantee *a priori* that they will be more potent than other tendencies which might be postulated with similar *prima facie* plausibility.

It is commonly charged, for instance, that Marx overestimates the influence of social movements based on economic class, and underestimates the power of ties based on race, religion, nationality and cultural heritage. The issues raised by such charges are complex, and not easily settled. Such issues are difficult in part because they cannot be easily divorced from questions which are philosophical, in the murkiest sense of the term. To anyone who shares Marx's belief that there is some basic tendency for people to pursue their real, objective interests (whether they are conscious of them or not) the question which social factors will have significant and independent historical potency cannot be separated from the question of what people's basic needs and interests are.² Some people believe that the preservation of cultural symbols, religious feelings and ties of blood and soil have

genuine value for human life which is independent of their capacity to express class interests and lend support to certain economic forms. If they share Marx's view about the historical potency of objective interests, these people will also see these values as having an irreducible and enduring place in historical explanation. On the other hand, someone (like Marx) who believes that religious, racial or national ties are in themselves humanly worthless superstitions, will naturally view them as having no role to play in history once people have 'finally come to regard their life situation and mutual relations with sober eyes'.³ The facts of history are relevant to such disagreements, but are unlikely to put an end to them.

Of course Marx and Engels never deny that extra-economic factors play a significant role in determining the course of historical events. Engels agrees it would be 'ridiculous' to try to explain every social fact ('the existence of every little German state', or 'the origin of High German consonant permutations') in economic terms. The 'form' of historical events, he says, is determined by factors of all sorts, and in fact largely by what is purely 'accidental': it is only the 'content' of history which historical materialism pretends to explain.⁴ But the distinction between 'form' and 'content' here has to be a loose and relative one. To say that economic tendencies determine the 'content' of historical events is just to say that these tendencies so predominate over all other tendencies that 'in the last instance' a basic 'movement' of history can be read off from them as it cannot be read off from anything else. It is not self-evident that economic tendencies have this clear predominance in history, or indeed that anything has it. History might have no 'driving forces' or 'basic movement' at all, because the kind of intelligibility Marx is looking for in it might simply not exist.

Not only is it not self-evident whether historical materialism is true or false, but it is difficult to say precisely what empirical facts would verify or falsify the materialist hypothesis. This point is widely recognized by Marx's critics. But they have a deplorable tendency to infer from this that historical materialism is a 'metaphysical' theory in some pejorative sense, not an empirical hypothesis at all. It is an elementary mistake to dismiss a theory as nonempirical simply on the ground that its claims are too far reaching and complex to make its verification or falsification an easy or simple matter. Historical materialism is a proposal or outline for a certain kind of explanatory theory about the structure of societies, the nature of their institutions and prevalent ideas, their changes over time. We may consider historical materialism verified to the extent that successful theories of this kind have been

produced, and falsified to the extent that the empirical facts have resisted explanation along materialist lines. For several generations, Marxist and non-Marxist historians have debated the merits both of Marx's own theory and of various attempts to extend or supplement it. If these debates have still not established any firm conclusions, this is easy enough to explain in terms of the inherent difficulty of the issues, the low level of theoretical understanding on which they have often been discussed, and the obvious partisanship of the participants. There is no need to explain it by supposing that empirical evidence is not relevant to the evaluation of materialist social theories.

2 Materialist explanations are teleological

I have described the basic explanatory postulates of historical materialism as 'tendencies'. In Chapter 5, I suggested that materialist explanations are typically not *causal* explanations. I now suggest that they are *teleological* explanations.⁵

Teleological explanations arise in connection with what are sometimes called 'goal-directed systems': systems which exhibit a persistent tendency to achieve or maintain a certain state, or to change in a specifiable direction. By calling the tendency 'persistent' I mean that it is relatively independent of conditions external to the system, so that the system shows some ability to adapt to potentially disturbing influences, and maintain its characteristic tendency in the face of them. We explain some element or aspect of such a system teleologically when we show how it manifests or contributes to the persistent tendencies which characterize the system, and provide reasons for thinking that this element or aspect exists *because* it manifests or contributes to those tendencies. The behavior of living organisms and many features of their internal structure are explained teleologically when it is shown how this behavior or these features contribute to the organism's tendency to remain alive and in good health. This tendency is such a basic and pervasive fact about living things that it explains the existence in living things of behavior or structures which are necessary for their survival and health. A more elaborate account of the reasons for thinking that teleological *explananda* exist because they contribute to this tendency might be provided by a theory of natural selection. But I doubt that the legitimacy of teleological explanations is necessarily dependent on the availability of a true account of this sort. (Darwin's theory shed light on the teleological explanations biologists had been using for centuries, and contributed

a lot to our understanding of why, and within what limits, they apply to the structure, functioning and behavior of living things. But it did little to legitimate – and nothing to discredit – these explanations.)

The explanations proposed by historical materialism are typically teleological in the sense just described. Marx proposes to explain the social relations prevailing in a community by showing how they manifest or contribute to its tendency to make efficient use of its productive powers. And he takes this tendency to be a sufficiently basic and pervasive feature of societies to account for the existence of the phenomena which manifest it. Productive powers ‘determine’ production relations in the sense that these relations exist *in order to* bring about an efficient use of productive powers, and *because* they bring about an efficient use of productive powers. Historical materialism proposes to account for large scale changes in social relations either by showing how they serve to adapt these relations to new productive powers or by showing how they contribute (at that stage of history) to the persistent expansive tendency of humanity’s productive powers. Social relations change *because of* the development of productive powers, that is, *in order to* accommodate or effect that development.⁶ Further, Marx proposes to explain the character of a society’s legal system, politics and moral or religious beliefs by showing how they serve to sanction its social relations. The ‘economic structure’ of a society is thus the ‘basis’ of its legal, political and ideological ‘superstructure’ in the sense that many features of the superstructure can be explained in terms of their ability to make the basic economic relationships work. Finally, Marx proposes to explain the power of certain political groups and the prevalence of certain ideas by showing how they serve class interests. In other words, he means to explain them by showing how they manifest the tendency of people living under similar conditions to organize into movements with general interests, and to get these interests satisfied as far as the class’s historical situation permits. Revolutions occur and class struggles have the outcome they do, *in order that* the productive powers of society may continue to expand, and the social relations of production may be suited to them.

Many caricatures and misguided criticisms of Marx’s theory have come from the (usually hazy) recognition that the theory involves teleological thinking, combined with various misconceptions about what teleological explanations are. To provide a teleological explanation of something is not to assert that some events have temporally later events as their efficient causes, nor is it to attribute what is

explained to the intentions of a human or superhuman agent. A teleological explanation accounts for its *explanandum* in terms of the (already existing) persistent tendency of a system to achieve a certain result or move in a certain direction. Such tendencies are often found in unconscious things, and even in conscious beings they are usually not the result of conscious intentions. To recognize the existence of teleological tendencies (as Aristotle already knew quite well) is not to commit oneself to saying that they result from the deliberations of a conscious agent. To hold, for instance, that humanity has a persistent tendency to expand its productive powers is not necessarily to hold that the human race or its members are moved by the 'idea of progress', or that human beings consciously have any universal or collective motives or aims at all.

Neither does the recognition of teleological tendencies require that one should hypostatize them as entelechies or occult agencies of any sort. (To see history as governed by certain basic tendencies does not require us to believe in a 'force of destiny'.) Marx's view, from very early in his career, was always that the 'social history of men is never anything but the history of their individual development, whether they are conscious of it or not'. *The German Ideology* makes this very plain:

The philosophers have represented the outcome of the historical process as an ideal under the name 'human' and have grasped history as the process of 'human being's' development, so that at each historical stage 'the human being' is substituted for individuals as the driving force of history. . . . The communists in practice treat the conditions generated through production and intercourse as conditions of social unity but without imagining that it was the plan or destiny of previous generations to provide them with these materials.⁷

Why do people so often regard teleological explanations as necessarily involving either the attribution of events to the intentions of conscious agents or the belief in occult forces? Putting aside religious and metaphysical motives, I think the chief reason is a propensity to confuse teleological explanations with efficient cause explanations. But the use of natural teleology, before Darwin, by religious apologists has also played a mischievous role in contributing to the misunderstanding of teleological explanations and their association with superstitious ways of thinking.

Explanations generally may be viewed as tracing the *explanandum* to some sort of regularity or abiding feature of the world. Causal explanations (as they are now commonly understood) work by tracing an event to some lawlike regularity in the behavior of things. The efficient cause of an event is the set (or some prominent subset) of conditions upon which the event follows in accordance with a certain causal law. Teleological explanations work by tracing the *explanandum* to a persistent tendency of some system to which it belongs. The tendency, however, does not function in the explanation like an agent or efficient cause, bringing about the *explanandum* in accordance with some law. The tendency is rather more analogous to the causal law itself, for it is the regular or abiding feature of the world to which the *explanandum* is traced. To look at the tendency itself as an occult causal agent or to hypostatize an intentional agent behind it is to confuse teleological explanations with causal ones, and in effect to insist that teleological explanations must be causal in spite of themselves. The demand that teleology be explained by the will of God exploits this confusion for the benefit of superstitious systems of belief.

Of course, it may be reasonable to ask for a causal explanation of the existence and workings of the persistent tendency which grounds a teleological explanation.⁸ It is a matter of controversy whether such tendencies can always be causally explained, and it is also debated whether teleological explanations can, as regards what they assert, always be 'reduced to' (or translated into equivalent) nonteleological explanations. I know of no basis for guessing at Marx's opinion on the latter issue, and doubt that he has one. On the former issue, the indications are that both Marx and Engels do regard all teleological tendencies as causally explicable in materialistic terms (biological ones, for instance, by Darwinian evolutionary theory).⁹

However such issues are decided, there seems to be no good reason for thinking of teleological explanations as necessarily 'unscientific' or at odds with Marx's generally 'materialistic' view of the world. If there are causal explanations for the existence of organized systems and their persistent tendencies, these systems and tendencies are not the less objective features of the world for that. Even if the content of teleological explanations can always (at least in principle) be stated in nonteleological terms, teleological explanations nevertheless succeed in focusing our attention on the internal structure and global tendencies of organized systems in a way that nonteleological explanations do not. As long as we lack complete causal explanations for the

workings of complex organized systems (as we obviously still do both for biological organisms and for human societies) teleological explanations may be our only mode of scientific access to certain phenomena. Even after we acquire the needed causal explanations (if we ever do) teleology still provides an illuminating perspective on organized systems. There is widespread agreement about this among contemporary philosophers of science. As one influential writer has put it: 'The use of teleological explanations in the study of directly organized systems is as congruent with the spirit of modern science as the use of nonteleological ones.'¹⁰ Of course there is always room for objection to the particular teleological explanations Marx suggests. And there may be general objections to them, from those who deny that societies are really 'directively organized systems' or that they exhibit the persistent tendencies Marx attributes to them. But we are not on solid ground if we want to object to Marx's historical explanations simply because they are teleological in form.

3 Is Marx a historical teleologist?

Marx does not reflect philosophically on the form of explanation his materialist theory employs. I do not say that historical materialism involves teleological explanations because Marx ever announces an intention of providing explanations of this form.¹¹ Rather, I say it because (as I interpret his theory) the form of the explanations it offers is in fact teleological. But it would be a serious objection to my interpretation if Marx disavowed the kind of explanations I attribute to his theory. There are a few passages in which Marx might appear to be doing just this, and my interpretation ought to confront such passages. In every case, I contend, careful inspection reveals that Marx is not criticizing or repudiating teleology generally or the kinds of teleological explanations I have attributed to his theory, but only the abuse of teleology by natural theists or speculative philosophers. I will try to show this by discussing the two passages where it seems to me least evident.

The first passage is found in *The German Ideology*:

History is nothing but the succession of single generations, each of which exploits the materials, capital and productive powers made over to it by the previous ones, thus on the one side continuing the traditional activity under changed circumstances and on the other modifying the old circumstances

with wholly changed activity. This can be speculatively distorted so that later history is made the purpose of earlier. . . . Thereby history becomes a 'person beside other persons', having its own purposes, . . . signified by the words 'destiny', 'purpose', 'germ' or 'idea'.¹²

Marx's target in this passage is not teleological thinking generally, but only views which represent later stages of society as the goal (conscious or unconscious) of earlier ones. Marx's theory involves nothing of this kind. Marx does not, for instance, explain capitalism teleologically by saying that it makes communist society possible (though Marx does hold that capitalism *in fact* makes communism possible). Instead, he explains capitalist social relations teleologically by showing how they serve to make efficient use of existing productive powers and to stimulate the further development of these powers. Marx's theory rests on the idea that there is a general historical tendency for productive powers to be used efficiently, and to expand. But Marx does not hold that there is a general historical tendency for a certain kind of society (such as communist society) to come about. It is the belief in historical tendencies of this latter kind that is being attacked in the above quotation.

The second passage comes from an 1861 letter from Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, where Marx says of Darwin's theory of evolution that 'not only does it strike a death-blow to "teleology" in the natural sciences, but also empirically explains its rational meaning.'¹³ This remark might be read as saying that Darwin's theory has rendered teleological explanations in general obsolete (at least in the natural sciences) and that such explanations have 'rational meaning' only insofar as there exist causal explanations (such as those provided by natural selection) for the tendencies on which they are based. Even so, the remark would not entail that teleology is obsolete in historical studies (where no correspondingly successful causal theories have yet emerged).

But I do not think even this is a correct reading of the remark. Marx and Engels's respect for Darwin (which is not unbounded) does not rest on the fact that Darwin provided causal explanations of biological organization. It rests on the fact that he exhibited a progressive historical movement in the natural world, and provided a purely naturalistic account of biological organization, undercutting explanations of natural teleology in theological or supernaturalist terms. In the letter to Lassalle, I think Marx means by 'teleology' what Engels elsewhere

calls the 'old' or 'external' teleology, which explains teleological regularities by reference to the will of an extramundane creator. Engels correctly observes that the notion of 'inner purposiveness' employed by Kant and Hegel does not do this, and he is critical of Ludwig Büchner, Ernst Haeckel and other 'mechanistic materialists' for confusing the two types of teleology.¹⁴ As we shall see in Part Five, dialectical thinking (whether Hegelian or Marxian) deals with organized systems, and deals with them teleologically. Engels recognizes this fact.

Once we consider the teleological character of materialist explanations, we can see clearly what is wrong with many common misinterpretations and criticisms of historical materialism. In general, when we explain something teleologically by showing how it manifests or contributes to the tendency of a system to achieve a certain result, this does not exclude (on the contrary, it positively implies) that the teleological *explanandum* figures as a causal *explanans* of the result. Thus when Marx (teleologically) explains social relations in terms of productive powers, or political and ideological phenomena in terms of economic structure of society or the class struggle, this does not exclude (on the contrary, it positively implies) that certain features of social relations figure in causal explanations of the state and development of productive powers, and that superstructural phenomena causally influence the economic basis of society. Marx's theory is thus fundamentally *incompatible* with any form of 'economic determinism' which holds that law, morality, politics or religion exercise no causal influence on material production or economic relations. In fact, it is precisely these influences which Marx's theory tries to understand, to explain in terms of the economic tendencies they manifest. The causal influence of superstructural phenomena begins to threaten Marx's theory only when these phenomena exhibit tendencies of their own which diverge from the 'basic' economic ones. Marx and Engels do not deny (indeed, they explicitly affirm) that these other tendencies exist, but they believe (for plausible if not decisive reasons we have already examined) that 'in the last instance' the economic ones must predominate over them.

The same considerations also suffice to dispatch all criticisms which say that there cannot be one 'basic' or 'predominant' factor in society or history because society and history involve the reciprocal interaction and mutual determination of many different factors.¹⁵ Marx agrees that there is no single 'predominant factor' in history if this phrase refers to economic, political or ideological facts regarded as

efficient causes. But that does not commit him to denying that certain persistent tendencies traceable to material production predominate in determining the general character and result of the interaction of different causal factors. Of course, it might be that the interaction of various tendencies in history is just as complex and indeterminate as the reciprocal interaction of causal factors. But to admit that there is no predominant causal factor in history does not commit Marx to saying that there is no predominant teleological tendency in it.