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PRODUCTION AND SOCIETY

1 'Economic determinism'

Marx and Engels regard the materialist conception of history as one of the most fundamental and distinctive tenets of Marxism. Engels ranks it, along with the theory of surplus value, as one of Marx's two great original contributions as a social scientist.[1] The central claim of historical materialism is that people's economic behavior, their 'mode of production in material life', is the 'basis' of their social life generally, that this 'economic basis' generally 'conditions' or 'determines' both the society's remaining institutions, and the prevalent ideas or forms of social consciousness.

Marx's historical materialism has often been described as 'economic determinism' – a term he never uses himself.[2] The label would be innocuous enough, except that it encourages the notion that Marx's historical materialism is a version of the 'determinism' which holds that all human actions are causally determined by factors wholly outside the agent's control – in Marx's case, by 'economic' factors. On this interpretation, Marx's thesis is that people's thoughts and actions, their political behavior as well as their moral, religious and philosophical convictions, are all causally determined by economic facts, while these actions and convictions themselves exercise no influence whatever on the economic situation.

It is not at all clear, on this interpretation, just what sorts of facts are supposed to count as 'economic' (many critics decorate their misinterpretation at this point with charges that Marx is unclear or inconsistent about this). But however the term 'economic' is understood, it is fairly clear that 'economic determinism' is both a false view and a fairly simple-minded misinterpretation of Marx. It contradicts not only common sense and everyday experience, but also countless things which Marx himself says or takes for granted in his writings on

politics and history. No matter how much people's ideas, social behavior and political decisions may be influenced by economic factors, it is also obvious that these things in turn have some impact on the economic realm. If Marx had denied that they do have any such impact, then it is hard to understand how he could have seen any point in writing books and pamphlets or engaging in political agitation, apparently with the aim of bringing about changes in the economic structure of society by changing people's ideas about it and bringing political influences to bear on it.[3]

In Chapter 8, we will consider whether Marx is committed to the view that human actions are causally determined. For the present, the point to be made is that Marx's historical materialism does not involve 'economic determinism' in the sense just described. As a matter of fact, nothing said by either Marx or Engels commits them to any such view. Marx does say that the 'economic basis' of society 'conditions' and even 'determines' its political and intellectual life-processes. But this is not incompatible with saying that the 'conditioned' and 'determined' aspects of social life cannot also have some influence on the economic sphere. The geography and climate of a certain region certainly 'condition' and even 'determine' the kinds of living things which can survive in that region. But this does not preclude the life processes of the organisms in that region from having some influence on these 'determining' factors.

Engels in fact explicitly denies that 'the economic moment is the sole determining one'; 'It is not the case that the economic situation is the cause, alone active, and everything else is only a passive effect.' On the contrary, he asserts that while 'the material mode of life is the *primum agens*, this does not preclude that the ideal regions may react on it in turn and exercise a secondary influence.' Engels describes the interaction of economic factors with political ones as 'a reciprocal action of two unequal forces', and insists repeatedly that while ideal or political factors may 'preponderate in determining the *form*' of historical events, their 'content' is always 'determined in the last instance' by the underlying economic factors.[4] It has sometimes been suggested that such remarks by Engels represent a revision of historical materialism as earlier expounded in his own and Marx's writings. But this suggestion cannot be correct. For essentially the same thoughts can already be found in *The German Ideology*, co-authored by Marx and Engels, and containing the first self-conscious exposition of historical materialism:

> This conception of history thus rests on developing the actual process of production, and even on proceeding from the material production of immediate life, grasping the form of intercourse connected with this mode of production and generated by it, hence presenting civil society in its various stages as foundation of the whole of history and also in its action as state, explaining from it the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morals, etc., etc. . . .; the whole matter can naturally be presented in its totality (and hence also the reciprocal action of these different sides upon one another).[5]

The 'economic determinist' interpretation of Marx has been adopted, I think, not so much because Marx uses the word 'determine' (*bestimmen*) to describe the relation of the 'economic basis' to the social 'superstructure' as because Marx's readers have been unable to see how he could ascribe systematic explanatory primacy to the economic realm without ruling out the possibility of any significant 'reciprocal action' of the 'determined' spheres on the 'determining' one. If politics and religion can 'react' on the economic situation and exert some 'force' on it, why does Marx want to rule out altogether the possibility that they might 'condition' and even 'determine' the economic structure of society? Engels' comments make it plain that historical materialism wants to deny such a possibility (at least 'in the last instance'), but these comments leave us in the dark about the motivation behind such denials. They strongly imply that what makes the economic factor the 'determining' one is its high degree of influence relative to the other social factors with which it is supposed to interact. But they do not explain why Marx and Engels ascribe this dominant influence to the economic sphere.

I do not think it is misguided to see the truth of historical materialism as turning on the question of the relative degree of influence exercised by the facts of material production as compared with other factors in social life. But before we can appreciate what is involved in this question, we must be clearer about the way in which the economic structure of society is supposed to explain the constitution of society and social change. To this end, let us first take a closer look at the elements of Marx's materialist analysis of society, and the relations which are supposed to obtain between them.

2 Productive powers, production relations

In his 1846 letter to P.V. Annenkov, Marx writes:

> What is society, whatever its form may be? The product of men's reciprocal action. Are men free to choose this or that form of society? Not at all. Posit a certain state of development of the productive faculties of men and you will get such and such form of intercourse and consumption. Posit certain degrees of development of production, intercourse and consumption and you will get such and such form of social constitution, such and such organization of the family, of orders or classes, in a word, such and such civil society. Posit such and such civil society, and you will get such and such a political state, which is nothing but the official expression of civil society.[6]

In this passage, Marx sets forth a series or hierarchy of social factors or structures, starting with what he takes to be the most basic and proceeding toward those which he believes can be explained in terms of what occupies a more fundamental place in the hierarchy. Specifically, the passage indicates three relationships of dependence:

(A) The 'form of intercourse and consumption' depends on the 'state of development of men's productive faculties'.
(B) The 'form of social constitution' or 'civil society' depends on the 'degree of development of production, intercourse and consumption'.
(C) The 'political state' depends on 'civil society'.

Marx's terminology here does not correspond exactly to that used in some of his more familiar statements of historical materialism, partly because this letter represents a relatively early statement of his theory, and partly because he is writing in French. But the elements distinguished in this passage, and the relationships posited between them, do belong to his theory in all his expositions of it. Let us consider each of these elements in turn.

The most fundamental factor in the materialist account is what Marx here calls society's 'productive faculties'. Marx's German term *Produktivkräfte* was originally a translation of Smith's and Ricardo's 'productive powers', but has more often been rendered into English as

'productive forces'. There is some significance in this difference. 'Productive powers' and 'productive faculties' both suggest the capacities or abilities of human beings, whether individual or collective, which they manifest and exercise in their productive activity. 'Productive forces', on the other hand, suggests the physical concomitants, the arsenal of materials and instruments used in the process of production, or facilitating that process.[7] Of course these two possible referents of *Produktivkräfte* are in fact very closely related. As soon as production makes use of tools at all, the proper instruments of production are necessary prerequisites for the exercise of people's productive capacities; conversely, a tool is productively meaningless apart from the power of the human laborer who wields it. People's capacities to produce come into being along with the tools they employ, and the tradition of laboring techniques runs parallel to the handing down of the material means for their exercise.

According to Marx, a society's production depends on and is determined by its productive powers. Taken in the abstract, however, this principle is a truism. Any human activity depends on and is determined by the powers of which that activity is an exercise. But when we consider the social character of production, the principle has a significance which is less obvious. All social production beyond a very primitive level involves a definite division of social labor, an apportionment of different activities to individuals: 'In production', says Marx,

> men do not relate to nature alone. They produce only insofar as they cooperate in a determinate way and exchange their activities with one another. In order to produce they must address each other in determinate relationships, and it is only within these relations that their relation to nature, their production, takes place.[8]

Historical materialism holds that productive powers determine material production in the sense that they determine the division of labor in society. 'Labor', says Marx, 'is organized, is divided differently according to the instruments it has at its disposal. The hand mill presupposes a different division of labor from the steam mill.'[9] The efficient use of a particular set of instruments and productive capacities requires a mode of social cooperation in labor which is specifically adjusted to or harmonized with them: a society which produces using hand mills and suchlike instruments will need distinct groups of

laborers, in definite proportions, trained to the requisite degree in specific skills and engaged in modes of life suited to the respective types of labor they must perform. A society which employs steam machinery, if it is to produce with any degree of efficiency, must likewise accommodate its division of labor and modes of life to the productive forces. But the accommodation required may be a very different one.

Thus when Marx says that a certain stage of development in people's productive faculties gives us a certain form of intercourse and consumption, at least part of what he means is that a given set of productive powers requires, and consequently explains, a given division of labor. But this can be only part of what he means. For he tells Annenkov that by 'forms of intercourse' he means 'economic forms' or 'social relations': 'for example, the privileges, the institution of guilds and corporations, the regulatory regime of the Middle Ages', and the relationship of capital to wage labor which replaced all these relations in the modern period.[10] These economic forms and relations, however, do not belong immediately to 'material production', to the division of labor or the direct work relations of individuals with each other. The fact that two people do two different but complementary productive tasks does not directly tell us anything about their *social* relation to each other, or about the *economic* forms within which their labor is carried on. It does not tell us whether they are slaves, corvées, wage laborers or workers in a socialist state. If one person supervises the work of another, this does not tell us whether the supervisor is an overseer of slaves, a guild master supervising the labor of journeymen or a manager of wage laborers for capital.

If Marx means social or economic relations when he speaks of a 'form of intercourse', then he holds not merely that a certain set of productive faculties gives us a certain division of labor, but also that they give us a certain set of social and economic institutions, relationships of power, authority and ownership within which productive labor is carried on.

In Marx's writing after *The German Ideology*, he usually speaks not of the 'form of intercourse', but of 'relations of production', which in any society form an organic whole Marx calls the society's 'economic structure'.[11] Some critics of Marx maintain that this notion of production relations confounds work relations with social or economic relations, with relations between people which 'arise because production creates a need for them' or which 'help production go smoothly'.[12] Marx, however, is certainly aware of the difference

between what he calls the 'natural' or 'material' side of production and the 'social' or 'economic' side, and he attaches considerable importance to the distinction.[13] He often criticizes bourgeois economists for confusing the two, and treating as a natural feature of production what is in fact a feature only of its specifically bourgeois social or economic form.[14] But it is true that Marx seldom draws this distinction while expounding his materialist conception of history, and probably never draws it in such contexts with the clarity we might wish. 'The production of life', we read in *The German Ideology*,

> now appears as a double relation: on the one side as a natural, on the other side a social relation. . . . From this it follows that a determinate mode of production or industrial stage is always united with a determinate mode of cooperation or social stage.[15]

Here the distinction between 'natural' and 'social' is drawn explicitly enough, but it is not clear that it separates social relations, such as guild privileges and forms of property from purely material relations, such as the apportionment of productive tasks to different people. The term 'mode of cooperation' could easily mean either, or both.

I think it must be conceded that in his accounts of historical materialism Marx does not deal with this matter as often or as clearly as he should have. But there is no reason to suppose that he was unaware of the distinction between direct work relations and the economic relations within which work goes on. The important question is: What is Marx's conception of the relationship between the division of labor, the material work relations of a given society, and its form of intercourse, in the sense of its social relations of production, or economic structure? Another passage from *The German Ideology* may help us to supply the answer:

> Through the division of labor there develop different divisions among individuals cooperating in determinate kinds of labor. The relative position [*Stellung*], of these individual divisions is conditioned through the mode of organizing agricultural, industrial and commercial labor. . . . The different stages of development in the division of labor are just so many different forms of property, i.e. the existing stage of the division of labor also determines the relations of individuals to

> one another with reference to the materials, instruments and products of labor.[16]

Here Marx and Engels first appear to *identify* each 'stage in the development of the division of labor' with its corresponding 'form of property'. But their further explanation of what they mean makes clear both the distinction and the relationship: the existing division of labor 'determines' the 'relations of individuals to one another' regarding the means of production, just as the 'relative position' of the different social divisions is 'conditioned through' the way labor is organized. Material work relations, therefore, along with the productive powers on which they depend, are more basic than social and economic forms, and can be used to explain these forms. As Marx tells Annenkov: '[People's] material relations are the basis of all their relations. . . . The whole inner organization of nations [is nothing else than] an expression of a certain division of labor.' 'The different forms of the division of labor [become] so many bases of social organization.'[17]

Marx's thinking here is not difficult to follow. Just as the efficient exercise of a certain set of productive faculties requires a certain social division of labor, so either or both of these material factors may also demand, or at least favor, certain patterns of ownership and relations of economic domination and dependence. One method of farming, for instance, might require the working of larger fields than another, and hence favor a system of bigger landowners over a system of smallholding peasants. Factory production requires not only a greater division of labor but also a greater concentration of means of production than manufacture by skilled manual labor: the latter may well be suited to a guild system, where the former becomes possible only through the accumulation of capital and the hiring of wage labor.

The degree to which productive powers determine the prevailing form of intercourse or social relations depends on the degree to which their efficient employment and further development places constraints on social forms. Obviously we cannot explain absolutely every detail of people's social relations in terms of material production, and Marx never claims we can. He clearly thinks that the extent to which production determines social relations is a matter for careful empirical inquiry. But Marx's theory is based on the idea that the productive powers of society impose significant constraints on such things as forms of property and economic relations of domination and subjection.[18]

3 A 'technological' theory of history?

Marx speaks of the '*determination* of the organization of labor by the means of production', but he most often says of social or economic relations only that they 'correspond' to the productive forces, that they are 'connected' with them or 'intimately bound up' with them.[19] What, if anything, is the significance of this more guarded language? Some scholars believe that there is no real significance in it, that Marx's theory does hold in effect that social production relations are determined by the productive forces. Others take it to be evidence that Marx does not subscribe to a merely 'technological' theory of history, that is, to a theory which makes productive forces the basic explanatory feature. According to these writers, social relations 'correspond' to productive forces not in the sense that they are caused or explained by them, but only in the sense that the technology of a society is one of its most important characteristics, serving as an *indicator* of the social relations prevailing in it.[20]

I think people say things like this not because it is a natural way of reading Marx, but because of an excessively charitable desire to rescue Marx from what seems to them a simplistic and untenable view. Haunted by the specter of 'economic determinism', they of course want to point out that Marx often recognizes the influence of social structure on technological change, and think that this is incompatible with treating productive forces as basic to all materialist explanations. But just as Marx holds that the economic basis of society determines the superstructure without denying that the superstructure may react on or reciprocally influence the basis, so he may recognize within the economic basis itself that social relations may exert influence on social technology even if they are determined by society's productive forces. Here again, it is possible for Marx to hold that one of several interdependent factors is more powerful historically and more basic explanatorily than the others.

It is more than merely possible that Marx holds such views. Whatever the variations in his language, the clear import of the passage quoted earlier from the letter to Annenkov (and of many similar passages in Marx's writings) is that the nature of a society's economic relations depends on the faculties of production it has at its disposal. Besides, it is just not true that Marx never explicitly subscribes to this stronger thesis. *The German Ideology* tells us that 'the aggregate of productive powers accessible to men conditions the state of society'; in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx says that 'a change in men's

productive forces necessarily brings about (*amène, herbeiführt*) a change in their relations of production.'[21] It is clear that productive forces for Marx are not merely indicators of social relations, but the fundamental explanation of the forms they take, and of historical changes in those forms.

But there still may be some significance in Marx's typically guarded language about forces and relations of production. For one thing, economic relations are less immediately influenced by productive forces than work relations are. Even more important, productive forces for Marx are only the most prominent factor determining production relations, and not the sole factor. The economic structure of a society depends on the productive forces it possesses, but only against a background which includes the historical circumstances and social forms in which these powers happened to be acquired: 'the conditions in which men find themselves, . . . the social form which exists before them', or, as Engels puts it, 'the remains of earlier economic stages of development which have in fact been handed down and survived, often only through tradition or *vis inertiae*'.[22]

Perhaps, then, there is some truth in the idea that Marx does not hold an exclusively 'technological' theory of history, if the point is that for him productive forces explain social relations only if they are considered in connection with the social and historical circumstances in which they originated. On Marx's theory, given the material and social circumstances of Western Europe at the end of the middle ages, the productive forces of an industrial society could only be acquired and employed through the adoption of capitalist social forms: commodity production, private property in the means of production, the relation of capital to wage labor. In this sense, Marx holds that capitalist production relations in modern Europe were necessitated by these productive forces. But it is *not* Marx's view that these same productive forces inevitably require capitalist institutions for their growth and employment, whatever the historical circumstances. The fact that in the twentieth century a number of countries outside Western Europe (partly through the impact of Marx's ideas) industrialized themselves within socialist economic systems does not constitute any sort of counterexample to Marx's theory. In particular, Marx himself conjectured that a socialist revolution in Russia might well permit it to industrialize its productive forces without having to 'pass through all the disastrous ups and downs of the capitalist system'.[23]

Another reason many have hesitated to call Marx's theory of history 'technological' is the wide range of things Marx includes among

society's *Produktivkräfte*. The term embraces, as we have seen, not only tools, raw materials and other physical concomitants of production, but also the knowledge and skills of the men and women who produce. In some passages the catalog of 'productive powers' even seems to include social factors which, on any 'technological' interpretation of Marx, one would have expected him to include among the things to be explained by productive forces. *The Poverty of Philosophy* speaks of 'the revolutionary class itself' as a productive power. *The German Ideology* says: 'A determinate mode of production or industrial stage is always united with a determinate mode of cooperation or social stage, and this mode of cooperation is itself a "productive power".'[24] On the first of these passages, I agree with Cohen and Shaw that, considered in context, it will not bear the weight which critics of the 'technological' interpretation of Marx want to place on it.[25] The *German Ideology* passage, however, is discussed by neither Cohen nor Shaw, and it seems to me to raise more serious problems for a 'technological' reading of Marx's theory. The inclusion of modes of social cooperation among 'productive powers' is found not only in *The German Ideology*, but also in the *Grundrisse* and even in *Capital*.[26]

On the face of it, these passages seem to threaten Marx's entire project of explaning social forms in terms of productive powers, since they appear simply to identify what is to be explained with part of what is to do the explaining. (The charge that Marx's theory involves at this point a basic confusion, incoherence or explanatory circularity is a common one.) It is understandable, then, that so clear-headed an exegete as Cohen should want to insist that production relations or social forms are under no circumstances to be treated as productive powers. I wonder, however, whether it is really necessary for him to be so stubborn. Marx is presumably tempted to include 'modes of cooperation' among productive powers because they can be seen (in Cohen's words) to 'contribute materially within and to the process of production'.[27] But it might be possible to distinguish between those features of cooperative relationships which are productive powers in this sense and other (logically separable) features which are not, and which could be explained by productive powers (including certain features of the way people cooperate). If Marx's theory is construed along these lines, then we should not expect to be able to draw his crucial distinction between productive powers and production relations apart from a careful consideration of the social and historical context. The resulting theory would be less simple and tidy even than

the quite sophisticated versions of the 'technological' interpretation, such as those presented by Cohen and Shaw. In such a theory, care would have to be taken to distinguishing explanatory features of social relations from features which are to be explained by them.

Admittedly, Marx does not devote much explicit attention to these distinctions. But critics who charge him with confusing *explanans* and *explanandum* base their criticisms solely on his programmatic pronouncements, and do not show him guilty of such confusions in the course of his work as an economic historian. If we read Marx in the way I have suggested, his theory could still be called 'technological' in the weak (though possibly also misleading) sense that its aim is to explain production relations or social forms in terms of productive powers.

Marx believes that productive forces determine production relations. His ground for this belief is that a given state of society's productive forces will place constraints on the production relations, demanding or favoring some at the expense of others. But by itself this is not an adequate ground. For it is equally true to say, as Marx himself often does, that production relations also place constraints on productive forces. Large scale machinery and factory labor cannot exist in a society dominated by feudal or guild relations, but can only develop and find employment within the social relation of capital to labor. Societies tend toward a harmony between their productive forces and production relations. But the constraint of productive forces and production relations is mutual, and so by itself cannot be a sufficient ground for Marx's belief that from a broad historical perspective it is always the productive forces which represent the explanation or independent variable, and society's relations of production which must be seen as adapting themselves to its productive faculties. Can this belief be justified?

According to the letter to Annenkov, people are not free to choose the form of society in which they live because that form depends on their productive faculties, and 'it is not necessary to add that men are not free choosers of their productive forces.' People might be able to choose their political institutions, or even their economic ones, to change and adapt these institutions to their will. But it makes no sense to suppose that people might just choose which powers they have over the natural world, or bring about changes in these powers merely by willing it. 'Every productive force is an acquired force, . . . the result of men's practical energy; but this energy itself is circumscribed by the conditions in which they find themselves . . . which they did

not create, which is the product of the previous generation.'[28] Production relations too, of course, are 'independent of their will', but only because they are bound up in a relation of mutual constraint with people's productive powers, which by nature lie outside their choice.

Of course people might choose to limit the exercise of their productive powers, to let these powers lie fallow and even to divest themselves of some of their productive faculties. If they did this, they might succeed in preserving or restoring social relations incompatible with more developed production. This Luddite course has even been advocated by Rousseau and others who correctly observe that the productive powers of modern capitalist society are hostile to the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, just as they are hostile to the noble ways of life of the simple godfearing peasant and the honest independent artisan. But Marx is convinced that the protests of such moralists have always been ignored by history. 'What matters above all else', he declares, 'is not to be deprived of the fruits of civilization, the acquired forces of production.' Historical progress consists fundamentally in the growth of people's abilities to shape and control the world about them. This is the most basic way in which they develop and express their human essence. It is the definite means by which they may in time gain a measure of freedom, of mastery over their social creations. Social forms, in Marx's view, serve the needs of human history insofar as they are conducive to the consolidation and further expansion of productive powers. But no social form is an end in itself, and none is humanly indispensable. The basic thing in history is the relentless promethean expansion of humanity's creative powers.[29] This is why even communism for Marx is not a 'state of affairs', and 'ideal' social form, but merely a historical 'movement' effecting a transition between the era of class society and the era beyond class society.

4 Productive powers and historical development

Marx's thesis that the production relations of a society are determined by its productive powers admits of two related applications: First, it can explain the economic structure of a given society at a given time. Second, it can explain the changes which economic structures undergo in the course of history. Thus far it has been the first sort of explanation which has absorbed most of our attention. The theory behind such explanations, as it has been expounded here, is based on three main considerations: (1) The efficient employment of a given set

of productive powers and forces not only requires a certain material division of labor, but also – under a given set of historical circumstances – places significant constraints on the social and economic relations of individuals both to each other and to the material means of production. (2) The productive forces at the disposal of a given society at a given time tend by and large to be employed efficiently. And (3) since the productive forces of a society represent a relatively stable whole whose nature is not subject to people's voluntary control, they can be treated as the independent variable or determining factor in the essential harmony which obtains between themselves and the social relations with which they are bound up.

By far the most important application of historical materialism for Marx, however, lies not in the first but in the second sort of explanation, the explanation of changes between historical epochs. Marx's classic statement on this point comes from his *Critique of Political Economy*:

> At a certain stage of their development the material productive powers of society come into contradiction with the existing production relations, or, what is just a juristic expression for the same thing, with the property relations within which their movement up to this time has taken place. From forms of development of the productive powers, these relations turn into their fetters. Then enters an epoch of social revolution . . . No social formation ever perishes before all the productive powers which it can hold have developed; and new, higher relations of production never come on the scene until the material conditions for their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself.[30]

Marx's theory of social change as it is presented in this passage appears to be based on the three considerations mentioned above, together with two further theses: (4) There is a basic tendency for the human productive powers to expand, whether or not this expansion is encouraged by the existing production relations. And (5) no set of production relations (at least in class or pre-class society) is capable of accommodating an indefinite expansion in the powers of production. Given these two further theses, there will thus be an inevitable tendency for any society (at least any class or pre-class society) to expand its powers of production within the prevailing production relations until the latter can accommodate no more, and eventually to expand

them even beyond that point. This latter expansion must take place either through a change which has already occurred in society's production relations or else it must tend to undermine outmoded relations, and bring about a change in them. In the latter case, there is no longer that harmony or mutual adaptation between forces and relations of production which efficient material production and social stability require. The two reciprocally dependent factors come into conflict or 'contradiction'. Prevailing social forms, from 'forms of economic development', turn into 'fetters' on human progress.

In the struggle of productive powers with production relations, Marx believes it is always the former which must eventually win out. And this, in addition to consideration (3), is a powerful reason why Marx holds that productive forces determine production relations, and with them the whole structure of social life and consciousness. It is the confining production relations, not the expanding productive forces, which in his view are most likely to receive the backing of the society's 'superstructure', its political institutions, its customary morality, its established ideologies. To win out over the production relations and accommodate these relations to themselves, the expanding productive powers must wage a victorious struggle against these other social forces. The whole of society's devices for insuring peace and stability, law and order, complacency of mind and tranquility of spirit, must be too weak to withstand the power of humanity to rise above itself and attain to new forms of mastery over its world. Marx's philosophy of history is based on the conviction that the human spirit is so indomitable that these social constraints do in fact always prove too weak to withstand its growth.

Marx's theory of social development through the growth of society's productive powers is very well illustrated by his account of the rise of capitalism, presented near the end of volume 1 of *Capital*. By the end of the fifteenth century, feudal production, in its proper medieval form, has largely broken down. It has given way to what Marx calls 'petty industry' (*Kleinbetrieb*), farming and manufacture by individual laborers who privately own the land and means of production they employ. This particular form of social labor, the labor of independent individuals and family units, he says, 'only blooms, only quickens its whole energy and reaches its adequate classical form, where the laborer is the free private owner of the conditions of labor used by his own hands, the peasant of the field he tills, the manual worker of the instrument on which he plays like a virtuoso'.

But once it has developed its potentialities to the full, this system of

petty industry (so beloved of petty bourgeois moralists) runs up against certain inherent limitations:

> This mode of production rests on the splitting up of the soil and a dispersion of the other means of production. Hence it excludes not only the concentration of the means of production but also cooperation, the division of labor within a single process of production, and thus the social dominion over and regulation of nature, along with the free development of the social powers of production. It is compatible only with a production and a society which are narrowly confined within natural limits. To want to eternalize it would be, as Pecqueur rightly says, 'to decree universal mediocrity'.[31]

The system of petty industry is not destined for immortality. 'At a certain level it brings into the world the material means of its own annihilation. From that moment new powers and passions arise in the womb of society which feel fettered by it. It must be annihilated; it is annihilated.'

Marx describes in vivid (even lurid) detail how these fetters were broken in England, by the enclosures and the 'forcible driving of the agricultural population from the land into the cities'; by the Protestant 'spoliation of church property' and destruction of the monastic way of life; by the acquisition of new agricultural techniques which permitted greater cooperation and concentration of agricultural labor and a larger ratio of wool-producing pasture to arable land; by advances in manufacturing technology, and by the shameless brigandage of colonialism, through which Europeans achieved the concentration of wealth necessary to put this technology into practice; until 'individualized and dissipated means of production [were transformed] into socially concentrated ones, the dwarf property of the many into the massive property of a few, the great mass of the people [expropriated] from the ground and the soil, from the means of life and the instruments of labor.'[32] The transformation, as Marx depicts it, is not pretty; but on his theory, it is necessary. And although terrible, it is also (to Marx at least) inspiring. For it is the victory of new and higher human powers of production over limited social relations which can no longer contain them.

It is noteworthy that in Marx's account the social changes constituting the transition from feudalism and petty industry to capitalism precede in time most of the changes in productive technique

characteristic of mature capitalism. This, however, cannot be used as evidence that Marx does not explain changes in social relations by changes in productive forces. For Marx is quite explicit that it is the development of the 'material means of production' and the accompanying 'powers and passions in the womb of society' which determines the 'annihilation' of petty industry and the rise of capitalism. What it means, rather, is that in the rise of capitalism, the changes which are determined or explained largely precede in time the emergence of the productive forces which determine or explain them. This suggests either that Marx believes effects can temporally precede their causes or else that the explanations Marx employs in accounting for the rise of capitalist social relations from the growth of society's productive powers are not *causal* explanations. In Chapter 7 I will argue that the latter suggestion is the correct one.[33]

Marx never says explicitly why he thinks the struggle of material progress with social tradition must always end with the victory of the former. No doubt he thinks so in part because the rise of capitalism has been one long, grisly fable acting out that argument. But we may also guess at some more general reasons which may have influenced him. As we saw earlier, Marx holds that human fulfillment consists principally in the development and exercise of people's characteristically human capacities or 'human essential powers'. Accordingly, Marx is convinced that the basic function of any set of social relations is to make possible the efficient employment of the productive forces at the disposal of society, that is, to facilitate the development and exercise of humanity's essential powers. He regards all attempts to justify social institutions in other ways, by religious, moral or philosophical considerations, as mere ideological superstition. But Marx is also persuaded that human beings are, fundamentally and for the most part, rational. Given time and opportunity, the human race collectively will tend to do what it has most reason to do, even where people consciously act from other motives. Hence there is a tendency for people to exercise and expand their faculties, and to adjust their social relations accordingly. It is this tendency, the Marxian version of Hegel's *List der Vernunft*, which makes human history fundamentally intelligible:

> Because of the simple fact that every later generation finds the productive forces acquired by the previous generation, which serve it as the prime matter for new production, there forms a coherence in the history of men, there forms a history of

> humanity which is all the more a history of humanity insofar as the productive forces of men, and in consequence their social relations have grown. The necessary conclusion of this is that the social history of men is never anything but the history of their individual development, whether they are conscious of it or not.[34]

But why does Marx believe that social forms must always eventually offer resistance to human progress? Why couldn't capitalism, for instance, open-minded as it is, ever restless and eager for what is new, always ready to submit any dispute to the frank and free arbitration of the market place, serve as a social receptacle for endless material progress? In *Capital*, Marx tries to show in some detail how capitalist relations will inevitably constrain the development of productive forces, how they are already beginning to do so. More generally, however, Marx regards the *class* character of capitalist society as setting determinate limits on the extent to which expanded productive powers can be turned into expanded opportunities for the free development or self-actualization of human beings. In any class society, material progress is monopolized by the ruling classes, while material progress creates an objective need for emancipation on the part of the oppressed classes. Such tendencies, if carried far enough, must lead to fundamental changes in class relations or else to the complete abolition of class society itself.

Marx often writes as if he believes that the scenario he describes in the *Critique* – inevitable growth of productive forces to the maximum compatible with existing social forms, conflict between productive forces and production relations, victory of productive forces and social revolution – must be the chief explanatory pattern of historical development in any society, whatever its circumstances or its level of material culture. But it would be implausible as well as uncharitable to ascribe such a belief to him.[35] The general considerations behind Marx's theory of social change point only to an inevitable tendency for social relations to adjust themselves continually to this expansion. But they say nothing about the rate at which the productive powers of society must grow: it is quite compatible with Marx's theory – and indeed a point often insisted upon by him – that the growth of productive forces may under certain social forms be imperceptible, almost non-existent, over long centuries, because these social forms are particularly effective at retarding this growth; while other social forms (such as capitalist ones) promote a very rapid rate of growth in

society's productive powers, and consequently render themselves obsolete in a much shorter time.[36] Such irregular patterns of economic growth, to which Marx gives particular emphasis, have sometimes been cited by his critics as contradicting his thesis that production relations are determined by productive forces. The contradiction is illusory. To say that production relations may affect the rate at which productive forces expand is in no way to deny either that this expansion itself is the basic tendency in human history or that any given set of production relations itself exists only because, and for as long as, it can accommodate the growth of productive forces which is taking place within it.

A second point: inevitable tendencies do not inevitably prevail. They may be counteracted by other tendencies or even by extraneous accidental circumstances. Thus to say that the expansion of productive powers is a basic, inevitable tendency in human history is not incompatible with recognizing that in some cases societies have lost ground in regard to their productive capabilities, owing (say) to natural catastrophes, foreign invasions or to a particularly disastrous turn in their internal class struggles (what Marx and Engels presumably have in mind when they speak of 'the common downfall of the contending classes').[37]

Marx does believe that his scenario describes accurately both the victory of capitalist social relations over feudal ones and the eventual defeat of capitalist society by socialism. He does regard both victories as historically inevitable. This is because in these cases he sees no contrary tendencies or disruptive circumstances standing in the way of the basic historical tendencies from which his scenario naturally follows. Marx's belief in the historical inevitability of certain social changes, whether or not it is correct, is based on his assessment of the whole range of empirical circumstances which he views as affecting the outcome in the particular case. It is never, as many of his critics would have us believe, simply a matter of dogmatic guesswork inspired by a priori speculative doctrines.